

Annual Report

2024 - 2025



CAPSA - Promoting Equity for Substance Use Health through Education, Research and Co-Design.

CAPSA is a versatile and quick-acting national organization known for moving novel ideas into action. Our goal is to dismantle systemic stigma and promote Substance Use Health for all people on all pathways to wellness. For more than a decade, we have led practical training, research, and community events with service providers, policymakers, employers, and academics to design equitable services and supports. Our work blends practice-based, scientific, and experiential expertise, and is led by systemic stigma experts with backgrounds in education, research, clinical practice, and policy.



Reflections on a Year of Momentum and Leadership

Message from CAPSA's CEO



Dear friends and partners,

This past year has been one of remarkable progress, deep reflection, and continued momentum for CAPSA. Together with you, our community of collaborators, advocates, and changemakers, we advanced a future where **Substance Use Health is recognized as essential to equity and compassion** in workplaces, healthcare and society.

In March 2025, we completed our second Health Canada-funded initiative, a five-year journey that drove meaningful systems change. From creating practical workplace tools and innovative training programs to influencing national policy and producing groundbreaking research, CAPSA demonstrated how action, when grounded in **lived expertise and driven by compassion**, transforms structures that have historically perpetuated stigma.

This year, more than **7,000 individuals** participated in our events and trainings, and over **340,000 people** accessed our resources. Remarkably, **92% of participants** applied what they learned to change real-world policies, programs, and practices. These numbers are powerful—but beyond the metrics lie real stories of progress, personal growth, and systemic impact.

Our work gained national visibility through features in The Globe and Mail, National Post, Toronto Star, and Maclean's. This helped move Substance Use Health from the margins to the mainstream, shifting the narrative from judgment to **compassionate, inclusive care**.

Behind all this is an incredible team. I'm deeply grateful to CAPSA's staff, Board of Directors, and the community of people with lived and living experience. Your commitment to change is what drives our influence and sustains our momentum

As we look ahead, our new **2025-2030 Strategic Plan** charts a bold course forward. With your continued partnership, we will embed Substance Use Health into health systems, workplaces, research, and policy, creating a more equitable future for all

With gratitude,

Anthony Esposti

Chief Executive Officer
CAPSA

Reflections on a Year of Momentum and Leadership

Message from CAPSA's Board Chair



Dear supporters,

As Chair of CAPSA's Board of Directors, I am honoured to report on a year defined by measurable growth, real impact, and clear purpose.

This was a landmark year for CAPSA. We completed a five-year national systems-change initiative and helped lead national conversations on stigma. When evidence, compassion, and lived experience come together, results follow. CAPSA demonstrates so daily.

The Board had the privilege of supporting a team that delivers. Across education, workplace health, research, and community engagement, CAPSA has positioned itself as a national leader in Substance Use Health.

This year's highlights include:

- Publishing groundbreaking research on stigma, including the first study on stigma toward people who do not use substances
- Partnering with over 2,100 professionals to bring stigma-reduction training into practice
- Influencing public dialogue through major media coverage and expanding our presence across Canada and internationally
- Launching the Healthy Workplaces Campaign and helping shape co-leadership practices in service design

Our true north remains constant: Purpose-Driven. Grounded. Authentic. Pragmatic. Connected.

As this is my final year as a member of the Board and as Chair, I extend my deepest thanks to my Board colleagues and the CAPSA team for six remarkable years. Your support, friendship, and dedication to CAPSA's mission have made this the privilege of a lifetime. I will watch with great interest CAPSA's inevitable success in dismantling stigma and promoting Substance Use Health for all.

As we implement our 2025–2030 Strategic Plan, the Board is focused on strengthening CAPSA's infrastructure, growing our social enterprise, expanding bilingual and national partnerships, and ensuring Substance Use Health is integrated into systems that affect everyday life, from health care and education to employment.

Regards,

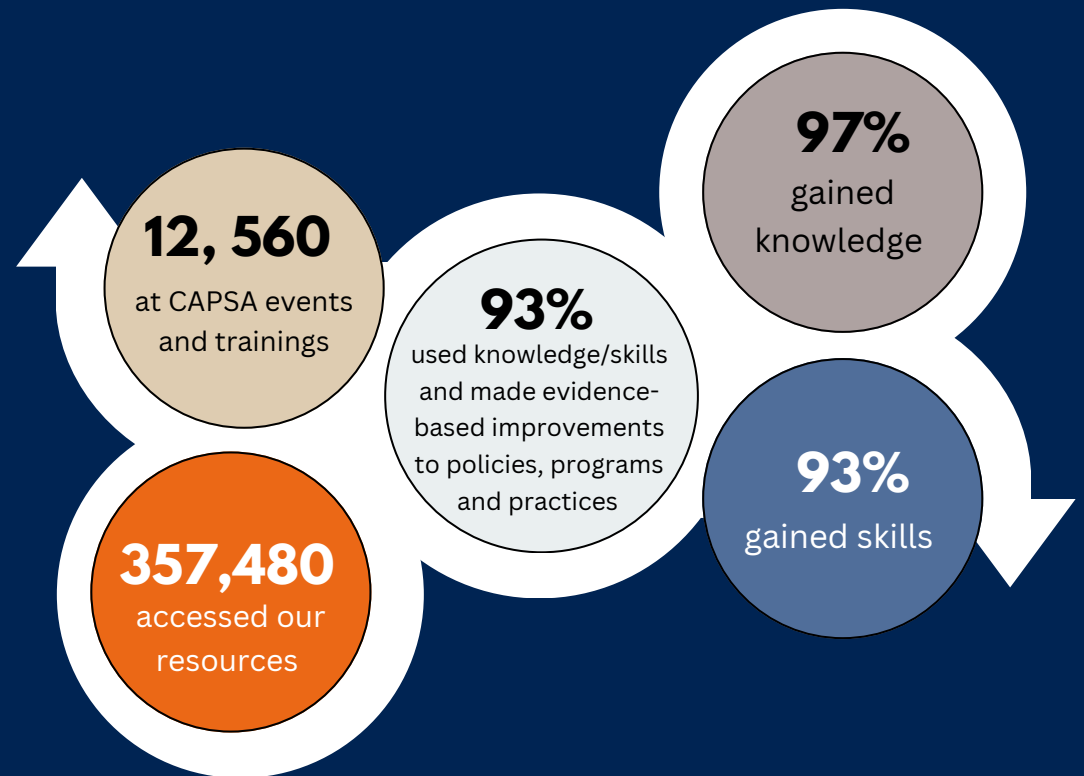
Patrick Dion

Chair, Board of Directors
CAPSA

Dismantling Stigma, Changing Systems

In March 2025, CAPSA completed its second project funded by Health Canada: “Leading Change to Systems that Perpetuate Stigma around Substance Use Health: Moving from Engagement to Action.” Over the five-year span, CAPSA established itself as a national leader and recognized expert. From conducting original research to developing the principle of Substance Use Health, to designing healthy workplace tools, creating new training modules, and building meaningful partnerships - *action* remained at the heart of our work.

The project yielded tangible outcomes, including changes to organizational policies, integration of innovative models, contributions to national standards, and influence on resolutions and strategic plans—surpassing expectations across all project indicators.



Turning Evidence into Action

Publications

This year, CAPSA successfully obtained a Mitacs Accelerate research-based internship, a program designed to bring together post-secondary students, not-for-profit organizations, and academic researchers to address complex challenges and generate new ideas. In collaboration with Carleton University, CAPSA hosted a PhD intern for an 8-month placement, working toward applied research and knowledge transfer. This partnership not only furthered an ongoing collaboration with Carleton University but also led to the intern joining our research team as a research associate. CAPSA's Research team grew the evidence base on substance use stigma through two key initiatives this year. First, we completed a preregistered study analyzing Reddit discussions to explore how stigma varies across different substances, Canadian cities, and political contexts. By examining language used in online conversations, this study identified patterns of substance-related stigma and provided insights to strengthen evidence-informed and responsive policy development.

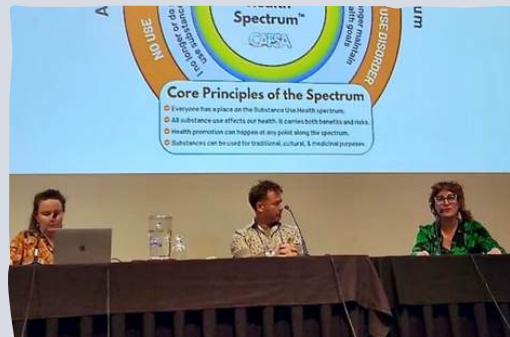
In addition, the team published the first peer-reviewed article to examine the experiences of stigma among individuals who do not use substances. This work expands the understanding of how stigma operates beyond substance use itself, offering valuable perspectives for researchers, academics, and public health professionals.

National Survey

As a follow-up to the first ever national survey on Substance Use Health, CAPSA and the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) went back to the public, asking more than 2,000 people living in Canada for concrete recommendations to improve nationwide access to Substance Use Health information and supports.

Their recommendations include:

- integrating Substance Use Health into primary care,
- expanding public health education,
- increasing the capacity of health-care workers to provide compassionate care,
- improving data collection and research, and
- enhancing workplace benefits.



Community Based Participatory Action Research

Through the Mitacs Accelerate Internship, CAPSA partnered with Carleton University to conduct focus groups designed to build community understanding of Substance Use Health. Using a qualitative approach, the study explored experiences across the full spectrum of substance use, not only illness, marking an important step toward advancing equity in research and broadening how substance use health is understood.



Substance Use Health Makes Headlines

THE GLOBE AND MAIL*

NATIONAL POST*

TORONTO STAR

“What We Don’t Know About Substance Use Costs Us”

This high-visibility piece spotlighted findings from our national survey, showing how stigma emerges when discourse is confined to disorder-only narratives, and issued a call to action for adopting a broader Substance Use Health framework, reaching 169,570 readers.

MACLEAN'S*

“Unaware And Underserved: The Silence Behind Substance Use Health Harms Us All”

This article uncovered the exclusion of substance use health from mainstream healthcare conversations, underscoring its population-wide impacts and amplifying the urgent need for an inclusive, health-focused approach, reaching 55,000 readers.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL*

NATIONAL POST*

TORONTO STAR

“CAPSA Leads National Conversation On Substance Use Health”

The article positioned CAPSA as a leading national authority on dismantling systemic stigma, highlighting key survey data and showcasing real-world co-leadership initiatives, reaching 119,492 readers.

Together, these publications significantly expanded CAPSA’s reach and influence, ensuring that substance use stigma and the solutions to address it, remain at the forefront of national dialogue.

From Local Impact to Global Stages

Expanding our reach at conferences everywhere. This year, CAPSA shared our message widely across Canada and internationally, presenting at nine conferences to more than 1,200 professionals spanning neuroscience, addiction medicine, public safety, and health across the United Nations.

Our focus on Substance Use Health and compassionate care resonated across sectors and target populations. Key highlights include our first workplace health presentation, reconnecting with international allies at Dianova, resulting in a widely shared blog across Latin America and building a partnership with the Canadian Society of Addiction Medicine, which has led to our involvement in co-developing their future conferences.



Highlights from the Year

WOW FESTIVAL 2024

On September 13, 2024, the annual Working on Wellness (WOW) Festival brought together 100+ community partners and more than 2,000 attendees to showcase integrated care across Substance Use Health, Mental Health and Physical Health sectors. The event achieved new milestones with the largest volunteer turnout, new awards, and unprecedented digital engagement—664,231 social media impressions and a 571% increase in website traffic. Post-event surveys showed 92% of attendees learned something new, 96% felt WOW helped them, and 95% would recommend the event, underscoring its strong impact and reach.

Be sure to join us next year!



Major Initiatives: Highlights from the Year

Tobacco Use Health Project

CAPSA was engaged by Health Canada to create resources supporting policy development and program delivery for provincial, territorial, and municipal governments, as well as NGOs, in the tobacco sector. These resources focus on addressing system-level stigma using approaches informed by people with lived and living experience (PWLLE) and CAPSA's expertise in Substance Use Health. Through a national network, 15 key informants were consulted to identify effective strategies for improving health outcomes related to tobacco use, as well as perceived risks, benefits, and reasons for use. Their insights also informed recommendations for healthcare providers and policymakers on best practices to support individuals' health in relation to tobacco use. To conclude this project, CAPSA delivered two knowledge exchange webinar sessions. The first was delivered to health professionals and policy/decision makers across Canada, while the second was provided directly to Health Canada's Tobacco Directorate and Cannabis Branch, engaging a total of 155 stakeholders.

Key Recommendations

As per the results of this research, we strongly recommend the adoption of a Substance Use Health lens to policies related to tobacco use.

This can be done by:

- Improving health outcomes through multiple tools and resources for overall wellness
- Meeting people where they are around their own health goals
- Shifting our language
- Providing actionable, accessible and evidence-based information about tobacco use and health.

Bringing Substance Use Health and Compassionate Care to School Mental Health Professionals Across Ontario

From August 2024–March 2025, CAPSA proudly partnered with School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO) to deliver training and education to more than 2,000 regulated school mental health professionals, mental health leadership teams, and parents/caregivers across the region. The webinar series "Compassion in Action – Eliminating Stigma through a Health-Focused Approach for Youth" had a 90% overall satisfaction rate, and 91% of parents and caregivers found the webinar "Talking About Substance Use at Home – Building Trust, Skills and Understanding" to be very useful.

What people had to say:

"I was very happy to see that using compassion as an important aspect in our work was being delivered as a course. As a social worker, I feel this has been a missing component for many staff and teachers that interact with the students."

"I appreciated the fact that the impact of stigmatization was made more concrete. Especially self-stigmatization, which I observe a lot with my students."

"Focus on overall health and a reminder of meeting students where they are at - not our job to 'fix'."

"I appreciated the health perspective and how our prejudices may impact."

Workplace Health, Redefined

In October, CAPSA launched its first-ever Healthy Workplaces Campaign, themed “It’s time to make Substance Use Health part of workplace health.” Through daily posts sharing key messages, evidence, and practical tools, while driving traffic to our end-of-campaign webinar, we achieved 62,200 impressions, 787 website clicks, and 200 webinar registrations.

The webinar, *Enhancing Workplace Health Through a Substance Use Health Lens*, reached all 10 provinces and engaged a wide range of sectors, including health, public safety, unions, labour-intensive industries, warehouses, restaurants, government, Indigenous organizations, leadership, and HR. Of the live webinar attendees, 85% indicated they want their workplaces to implement a Substance Use Health Support Policy, and 100% agreed that substance use should be approached from a health-focused perspective in the workplace.

**Workplaces are ready for CAPSA's
Substance Use Health Framework!**



Building Skills for Better Care

This year, CAPSA trained more than 2,100 professionals across Canada on stigma, substance use health, compassionate care and co-leadership. We engaged with leadership staff, health units, Indigenous organizations, paramedics, university faculty, public health agencies, community health centres, and more. Through these efforts, we directly influenced organizational change in policies, practices and programming.

"I thought the training was extremely informative and very "eye opening". I think our organization as a whole will benefit from this training. The presenter was interesting, very knowledgeable and engaging. Receiving training from someone that understands firsthand was an amazing experience!"
-Stigma Ends With Me Participant

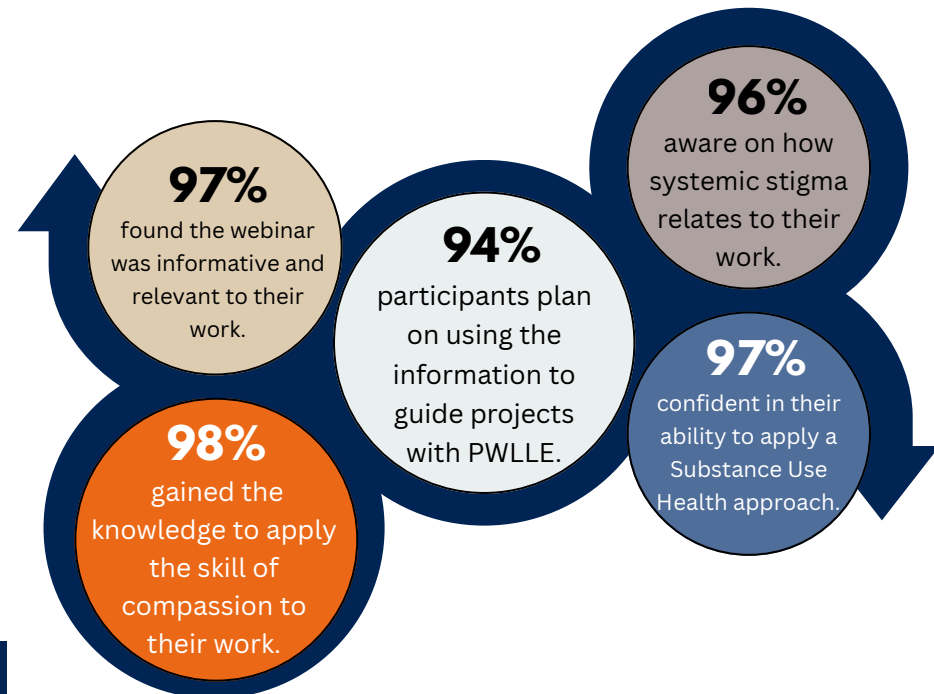
"Informative, actually of value for a work training course, overdue at our site, A+ great job!"
-Stigma Ends With Me Participant

"I just have to say that CAPSA has completely opened my eyes to the effectiveness of education from someone with lived experience AND formal education. The combination has a powerful impact."
-Compassionate Care Participant

"I have been with my organization for 17 years and this was by far the best training I've ever done."
-Stigma Ends With Me Participant

"This training helped me reconnect with the practices and ethics that make our work possible. I felt like the facilitator was able to skillfully weave in lived/living expertise and practitioner knowledge."
-Compassionate Care Participant

"I've actually taken this training several times and I learn something new every time!"
-Stigma Ends With Me Participant



Key Co-Leadership Webinar Takeaways:

- Deciding together.
- Meaningful and genuine engagement.
- Difference between informing; advising and co-leading. The language we use.
- The notion of co-leadership being about shared power and authority.
- I really loved the concept of practicing non-acceptance of harm.

The Key Principles of Co-Leadership Webinar

This webinar on CAPSA's Principles of Co-Leadership with people of lived and living experience (PWLLE) brought together more than 120 professionals across 6 provinces.

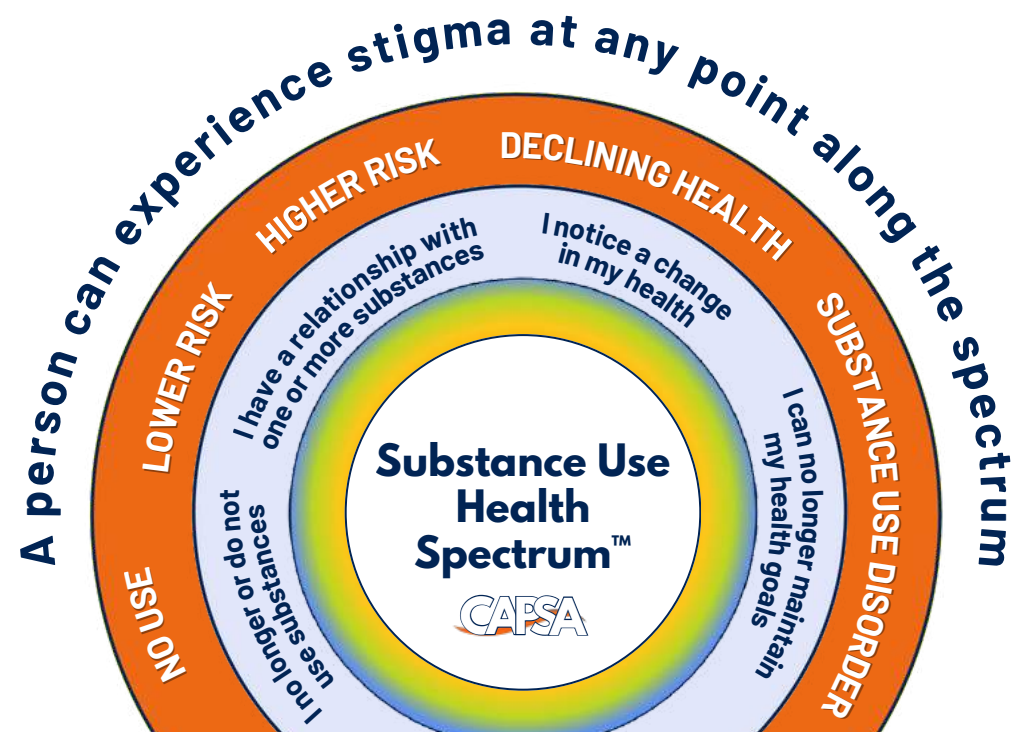
New Resources

Substance Use Health Spectrum™

CAPSA introduced our updated Substance Use Health Spectrum to foster a more inclusive, stigma-free understanding of health. By showing that everyone can find themselves somewhere on the spectrum and that health promotion is possible at any point, this tool challenges the false “healthy vs. ill” divide. Following its release, it has been widely adopted by partners across Canada.

Substance Use Health in Action

- Talk about how Substance Use Health has implications for all of us – not only people with SUD and in the process, reduce stigma, discrimination and othering.
- Provide access to health promotion strategies for all people when it comes to their substance use – regardless of the substance and how much is used.
- Recognize the risks and benefits of substance use to make informed decisions.
- Reinforce substance use health as a matter of health, not a criminal or moral issue.
- Stigma can be experienced at every place on the spectrum.
- Make connections between Substance Use Health, Mental Health, Physical Health, and the broader Social Determinants of Health in our systems of care.
- Equitably allocate resources and funding according to need.



Core Principles of the Spectrum

- ✓ Everyone has a place on the Substance Use Health spectrum.
- ✓ All substance use affects our health. It carries both benefits and risks.
- ✓ Health promotion can happen at any point along the spectrum.
- ✓ Substances can be used for traditional, cultural, & medicinal purposes.

New Resources

Substance Use Medical Emergency

This first-of-its-kind resource introduces Substance Use Medical Emergency, a person-first, non-stigmatizing alternative to terms like “overdose” and “toxic drug poisoning.” By focusing on immediate health needs rather than false beliefs and judgment, it strengthens system-level support for substance use health services. Since its launch, it has been adopted by hospitals, public health units, paramedic programs, pharmacies, and student organizations across Eastern Ontario, demonstrating wide-reaching impact and uptake.

Compassionate Care E-Module

The newest addition to CAPSA’s e-module suite – this self-paced course is based on our unique perspective around the notion of ‘compassion fatigue’. By focusing on building a healthy roadway to care, this module provides health professionals and caregivers with the necessary skills to challenge beliefs, counter frustration and fatigue, and staying well while helping others.



CAPSA
Overdose? Let's Call it What it is - a Substance Use Medical Emergency.
Substance use-related emergencies are complex, and words like "overdose" are no longer appropriate.

The term overdose has faced growing criticism from service providers. For many, overdose reduces complex situations to a medical label, ignoring the person it describes based on a flawed understanding of the emergency, bringing them further away from care.

Why "Overdose" Doesn't Work

It's Inaccurate
Overdose suggests someone took too much of a substance, causing acute brain, respiratory, or cardiac distress. However, this is rarely the whole story—or even the story at all. Factors such as changes in tolerance, poly-substance use, contaminated substances, or unique physiological reactions to substance use, age, and overall health are often primary contributors to these medical emergencies.

It Fuels Stereotypes
Public discourse perpetuates several misconceptions about overdoses, including that they only happen to people with substance use disorder (SUD), are linked to physical harm, or primarily affect individuals who are focused on using. Overdoses can happen to anyone—whether they use substances rarely, occasionally, or regularly. Research shows that most people who experience a substance use medical emergency haven't used substances in the past 24 months. Additionally, 55% of these emergencies occur when individuals use substances alone in their homes.

It Shifts Blame and Prioritizes Punishment
The term overdose emphasizes behaviour over the person, it assigns blame instead of focusing on care. This framing often leads to judgments and punishment-focused measures rather than compassionate, health-focused responses. Further removing the center from those they need. Similarly, terms like "drug poisoning" and "toxic drug death" focus on the substance rather than the individual. From CAPSA's perspective, the real crisis – the one demanding urgent attention – is that people are dying.

It's a Professional and Ethical Concern
Health professionals are increasingly concerned about using a term they – and those they support – know likely are rarely true or altogether inaccurate, and causes harm. They don't want to be part of perpetuating stigma, reinforcing harmful stereotypes, spreading misinformation, or deepening public misunderstanding of substance use-related emergencies.



CAPSA Strategic Plan: 2025-2030

CAPSA's board of directors and staff engaged in a re-imagining of our strategy for the next three to five years. The result is a refreshed vision for our organization that clearly articulates our values, what we aim to accomplish and what will be our focus as we advance equity for people seeking support for their Substance Use Health.

CAPSA Mission: At the forefront of change, CAPSA collaborates with partners to dismantle systemic stigma and promote health across the full spectrum of Substance Use Health.

Our Vision: All people, on all pathways to wellness, have access to support for their Substance Use Health – free from discrimination, conditions, or consequences.

Our Values

- **Purpose-Driven:** Advance compassion and health equity through actionable solutions.
- **Grounded:** Value experiential evidence alongside clinical and practice-based expertise.
- **Authentic:** Embody the diversity of values and experiences we promote in our work.
- **Provocative and Pragmatic:** Challenge outdated norms to address real-world needs and aspirations.
- **Connected:** Bridge the gap between people and the systems that support them.

Our Focus for the Next Five Years

- **Put Substance Use Health into Practice:** Move Substance Use Health from a conceptual framework into action through policy and practice in the healthcare system.
- **Meet Workplace Demand:** Expand support for employers, unions, and employee assistance programs to foster healthy, productive workplaces.
- **Expand Partnerships:** Build a diversity of alliances nationwide, with growing emphasis on French-speaking organizations.
- **Increase Use and Uptake of CAPSA Publications:** Produce relevant and representative resources to influence decision-making, reduce stigma and promote health.
- **Improve Co-leadership Capacity:** Co-design Substance Use Health services, policies, and research, highlighting the importance of experiential evidence in the process.
- **Increase Financial Independence:** Grow our social enterprise, enhance branding and marketing, and deepen relationships with charitable foundations.

The World We Envision: Substance Use Health Equity for All

Financial Highlights

SUMMARIZED STATEMENT OF EARNINGS: FISCAL YEAR APRIL 2024 - MARCH 2025

REVENUE
\$1,570,251

EXPENDITURES
\$1,555,075



Net Revenue: \$15,176