



# CISF CONNECT

BUILDING AUDIENCES.  
STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES.  
EXPANDING MARKETS.

## IMPACT REPORT 2025-2026

A national audience engagement initiative connecting Canadian audiences to diverse Canadian stories.

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# Executive Summary

CISF CONNECT is a national audience development initiative created by the Canadian Independent Screen Fund (CISF) to help Canadian films and documentaries build meaningful connections with audiences beyond traditional exhibition channels.

Recognizing that successful projects require more than production financing, CISF CONNECT combines community-based audience engagement with targeted producer marketing and promotion support. Through a national network of Film Engagement Specialists and direct support to producers, the program helps projects increase visibility, strengthen audience relationships, and position themselves for long-term success.

The program is designed to:

- Increase audience engagement for Canadian films and documentaries.
- Strengthen producer capacity in marketing, promotion, and market readiness.
- Create stronger connections between filmmakers and communities.
- Expand discoverability for stories from Black, racialized, newcomer, and underrepresented creators.
- Generate audience intelligence that can inform future distribution, marketing, and sales strategies.

The inaugural pilot exceeded expectations, demonstrating that strategic investments in audience engagement and marketing support can significantly increase audience participation, community connection, project visibility, and long-term impact.

## The Challenge

Canada has developed a strong ecosystem for financing and producing screen-based content. However, significant gaps remain between production and audience discovery. Many independent producers report:

- Limited marketing resources.
- Lack of audience development expertise.
- Difficulty sustaining engagement after festival premieres.
- Challenges reaching culturally specific audiences.
- Limited access to audience data and feedback.

These challenges are particularly acute for Black, racialized, newcomer, and emerging creators whose projects often rely on grassroots networks to build awareness and momentum.



CISF CONNECT was created to bridge this gap.

The program operates through a two-pronged strategy.

## 1. Producer Marketing and Promotion Support

Participating producers receive customized support to:

- Develop audience engagement plans.
- Build community partnerships.
- Strengthen marketing and promotion strategies.
- Expand audience reach.
- Prepare projects for domestic and international sales.

## 2. Film Engagement Specialist Network

In 2025/26 CISF trained and supported a cohort of 12 Film Engagement Specialists located across Canada.

These specialists function as cultural connectors who:

- Organize screenings and events.
- Build relationships with community organizations.
- Engage underserved audiences.
- Facilitate conversations around Canadian films.
- Collect audience insights and feedback.

Together, these two components create a sustainable infrastructure for audience growth.

## Producer Marketing and Promotion Support

As part of the CISF CONNECT pilot, four producers received audience development grants to implement customized marketing, community engagement, publicity, and audience outreach strategies.

These grants allowed the filmmakers to move beyond traditional festival screenings and invest in long-term audience building, community partnerships, targeted outreach, and market development.

The results demonstrate that relatively modest investments in audience development can significantly increase visibility, audience reach, and long-term impact.



## Case Study: Muzizi (Jamila Pomeroy)

Muzizi explores Vancouver's African diasporic culinary scene through a powerful story of cultural preservation, immigration, resilience, and food sovereignty.

CISF CONNECT support enabled the creation of an innovative sensory cinema experience that combined film exhibition with community celebration and culinary engagement.

### Results

- 157 attendees at the VIFF Centre screening.
- Main theatre reached capacity with audience overflow into the balcony.
- 8.1% increase in Instagram followers.
- 125% increase in social media views.
- 84% of online engagement came from new audiences.
- Estimated social media reach of between 500,000 and 750,000 people through community and influencer amplification.

### Producer Reflection

*"Community and cultural sovereignty are central to MUZIZI. The event became an opportunity to foster new connections, celebrate our local Black community, and create meaningful cultural conversations through food and film."*

## Case Study: Have You Heard Judi Singh? (Baljit Sangra)

Have You Heard Judi Singh? celebrates the life and legacy of pioneering South Asian Canadian musician Judi Singh.

Through CISF CONNECT support, the production team implemented a comprehensive audience development strategy that included social media campaigns, publicity, community screenings, and audience engagement consulting.

### Results

- Reached approximately 15,000 unique accounts.
- Generated more than 91,000 content impressions.
- Achieved over 2,000 audience engagements.
- 80% of audiences reached were non-followers.
- Hosted a dedicated community screening at the VIFF Centre.
- Established new partnerships with South Asian organizations and arts groups.

### Producer Reflection

*"The grant enabled us to create a cohesive and culturally informed audience engagement plan that continues to support screenings and community conversations around the film."*



## Case Study: The Track (Ryan Sidhoo)

The Track chronicles a compelling story of identity, resilience, and community while connecting deeply with Bosnian and Balkan diaspora audiences around the world.

CISF CONNECT support allowed the filmmakers to transform an already successful festival run into a sustained theatrical, educational, and grassroots release strategy.

### Results

- Screened in more than 10 cities across four countries.
- Screenings in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe.
- Sold-out screenings in London, Toronto, and other key markets.
- Winner of Best Film – Mountain Culture at the Banff Mountain Film Festival.
- Trailer exceeded 230,000 views within its first week.
- More than 10,000 unique visitors to the film website.
- Built partnerships with universities, NGOs, and community organizations.
- Created an outreach infrastructure that continues beyond the grant period.

### Producer Reflection

*"CISF support allowed The Track to outpunch its weight as an independent documentary, giving it a theatrical life, deepening its community impact, generating income for the filmmaking team, and positioning the film to continue growing."*

## CISF CONNECT: Marketing & Promotion Support: What We Learned

The producer grants reinforced a critical finding:

Producing a film is only the first step. Building audiences requires dedicated resources, expertise, and community partnerships. As proven by these case studies, the CISF CONNECT marketing support helped transform audience interest into sustained engagement, creating an enduring distribution and outreach model that continues to generate screenings, educational opportunities, and revenue.

Most importantly, the grants demonstrated that audience development is one of the highest-leverage investments available to independent creators.

When producers are given resources to engage audiences strategically, films travel further, communities engage more deeply, and projects generate impact long after production is complete.



# Film Engagement Specialist Program

The inaugural cohort included 12 Film Engagement Specialists operating in:

- Charlottetown
- Halifax
- Montréal
- Calgary
- Edmonton

Over the course of the pilot, these specialists organized screenings and audience engagement activities that connected Canadian films directly with communities across the country.

A total of:

**11** Canadian films were screened.

**664** audience tickets were distributed.

**300** completed audience surveys were collected.

**45%** audience response rate.

This response rate is exceptionally strong for cultural participation surveys and provides valuable audience intelligence for future programming and distribution efforts.

## Audience Impact

### Diverse Audiences Reached

Survey respondents included:

- 132 individuals identifying as members of racialized communities.
- 70 first-generation immigrants.
- 68 religious minorities.
- 41 members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community.
- 12 persons with disabilities.

These findings demonstrate the program's effectiveness in reaching audiences often underrepresented in traditional audience development models.



## **Strong Engagement Among Emerging and Active Cultural Audiences**

The largest audience segments were:

- Ages 30–39: 99 respondents
- Ages 20–29: 76 respondents

These age groups represent important audiences for the future sustainability of Canadian screen content and cultural participation.

## **Exceptional Demand for Continued Programming**

Audience appetite for ongoing engagement was remarkably high. When asked if they would attend monthly screenings:

**93% said YES** (280 out of 300 respondents)

This finding suggests strong potential for establishing sustainable audience communities that extend beyond individual screening events.

## **Audience Experience**

The program demonstrated that audiences are seeking more than passive viewing experiences. The most requested activities included:

- Q&A sessions with filmmakers.
- Conversations with actors and industry professionals.
- Networking opportunities.
- Social and community engagement events.

Audiences consistently expressed interest in deeper interaction with creators and stories. This validates CISF CONNECT's emphasis on relationship-building and community engagement as essential components of audience development.

## **Audience Discovery**

Survey results revealed that audiences primarily discovered events through social media and word-of-mouth. Digital outreach played a critical role in driving attendance and engagement. Community ambassadors and local networks proved equally important in reaching audiences. These findings reinforce the value of the Film Engagement Specialist model, which combines digital promotion with trusted local relationships.



# Film Screening Case Study

## A Tribe Called Love (Mohamed Ahmed & Andy Marshall)

A Tribe Called Love remixes the classic Shakespearean tale of star-crossed lovers, relocating it to Toronto's Somali community, and captures the warmth, humour, and complexity of community life, supported by a pulsing soundtrack.

Through CISF CONNECT, one of the Film Engagement Specialists organized a community and industry screening in Edmonton. This strengthened the film's relationship with regional creatives and organizations, while also generating positive audience feedback highlighting the importance of seeing Black and Muslim stories reflected on screen.

### Results

- 219 tickets sold of a 527-seat capacity.
- 44.8% survey response rate.
- Strong turnout relative to venue capacity on the coldest night of the year (-25C).
- Participation from both community members and local screen-sector community.
- Income + \$4,380.00 plus 5%GST.
- The creation of @themyrharoom a monthly screening series in Edmonton.
- Word-of-mouth from this screening led to a sold-out screening in Montreal, also organized by a CISF CONNECT Film Engagement Specialist.

### Producer Reflection

*"The screening of my film in Edmonton with CISF felt less like an event and more like a family gathering. The room was filled with warmth, pride, and a genuine love for Somali storytelling. You could feel how deeply the community showed up, not just to watch a film, but to support, connect, and celebrate together."*

## CISF CONNECT: Film Screening: What We Learned

The Edmonton screening reinforced CISF CONNECT as a viable model for combining exhibition, community engagement, and market development. This event highlighted the continued need for sustained exhibition opportunities beyond one-off screenings, importance of long-term investment in regional markets and proved that word-of-mouth within communities has a significant impact on sales at film screenings. Insights from this event also allowed CISF CONNECT to further build on partnerships to support equitable access to regional audiences and opportunities for Black and racialized creators.



# Building a National Infrastructure

The most significant achievement of the pilot may be the creation of a national audience development infrastructure.

Through CISF CONNECT, a network of trained Film Engagement Specialists now exists across multiple provinces, creating capacity that did not previously exist within the Canadian screen sector.

This emerging network provides:

- Local audience expertise.
- Regional market intelligence.
- Community partnerships.
- Audience feedback loops.
- Long-term audience development capacity.

The pilot demonstrated that audience development can be systematically supported rather than left to individual filmmakers working in isolation.



## Looking Ahead

Building on the success of the pilot, CISF CONNECT has entered its next phase focused on expansion, sustainability, and market impact.

Year 1 demonstrated that audience development requires investment at multiple levels of the screen ecosystem. Community-based audience engagement creates local connections and audience loyalty, while direct producer support ensures that films have the tools, expertise, and resources necessary to reach those audiences effectively.

In Year 2, CISF CONNECT is focused on strengthening both sides of this equation.

## Strengthening the Existing Network

The CISF CONNECT Film Engagement Specialist program will continue to support seven high-performing specialists operating in:

- Alberta
- Halifax
- Prince Edward Island
- Montréal

The program will also strengthen mentorship structures, peer learning opportunities, and regional advisory support to ensure knowledge is shared across the network and best practices continue to evolve.

## Regional Expansion

To increase national reach and ensure more equitable access to audience development opportunities, CISF CONNECT has expanded to:

- South Central Ontario
- Northern British Columbia
- Newfoundland and Labrador

This expansion will enable the program to engage new communities, strengthen regional partnerships, and build audience development capacity in underserved areas of the country.



## **Producer Marketing Support**

The pilot demonstrated that relatively modest investments in audience engagement can produce significant returns in audience growth, community participation, visibility, and long-term market sustainability.

Projects supported through the grant program:

- Reached thousands of new audience members.
- Generated substantial digital engagement and media exposure.
- Built partnerships with cultural organizations, educational institutions, and community groups.
- Expanded screenings beyond traditional festival circuits.
- Developed sustainable audience engagement strategies that continue beyond the grant period.

These findings reinforce a key industry reality: financing production alone does not guarantee audiences. There remains a significant gap in resources dedicated to audience development, discoverability and market readiness.

Future CISF marketing support will encourage producers to integrate audience-building and marketing strategies from the earliest stages of development, positioning projects for success both nationally and internationally.

## **International Market Readiness**

Building on the success of CISF CONNECT, the program will expand its customized support for producers preparing projects for domestic and international release.

Support will include:

- Audience and market strategy development.
- International positioning and branding.
- Community partnership development.
- Strategic marketing support.
- Distribution readiness planning.
- International outreach and networking opportunities.

The goal is to help Canadian creators build sustainable audience relationships while increasing their competitiveness in global markets.



## **International Partnerships**

Building on growing interest from international collaborators, CISF CONNECT will explore strategic partnerships across key global regions, including Asia and the Far East, South America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East.

These partnerships will focus on creating new sales, distribution, and co-production opportunities for Canadian producers and content creators. By connecting projects with international producers, distributors, broadcasters, platforms, and cultural organizations, CISF CONNECT aims to help Canadian stories access new markets, attract international financing partners, and build audiences beyond Canada's borders.

In addition to expanding commercial opportunities, these partnerships will strengthen cultural exchange, facilitate knowledge sharing, and position participating producers to develop long-term international relationships that support the global reach and sustainability of their projects.