Department of Human Services, in collaboration with ND Cares Coalition, hosts first
Military Peer Support Training

BISMARCK, N.D. – Military service members, veterans, their family members and survivors are
attending military peer support training May 6-10 at the Holiday Inn, 3903 State St., in Bismarck.
Hosted by the North Dakota Department of Human Services’ Behavioral Health Division, in
partnership with the ND Cares coalition, the goal is to train individuals who have lived experience
and are in recovery from mental illness and/or substance use disorder and are committed to helping
others. Once trained, these new peer support specialists can bring hope to others by sharing their
experiences and promoting a sense of belonging.

According to the division, peer support has existed in the behavioral health field for decades;
however, its rapid growth in recent years is due to the increasing evidence supporting its
effectiveness. A peer support specialist uses his or her lived experience of recovery, plus skills
learned in formal training, to deliver services in behavioral health settings to promote mind-body
recovery and resiliency.

“In just over a year, more than 220 individuals across the state have been trained as peer support
specialists, and 80 percent of those specialists reside in a rural community,” said Behavioral Health
Division Director Pamela Sagness.

The division contracted with Appalachian Consulting Group for its peer specialist training, which is a
person-centered, goals-oriented, strengths-based curriculum. It is based on the belief that setting a
person-centered goal is the heart of recovery.

Sagness said recovery is the process of gaining and maintaining control over one’s life – and the
direction one wants that life to go – after experiencing a mental health diagnosis, substance use
disorder and all the losses associated with those challenges. Training participants learn core
competencies, roles and tools for conducting peer support specialist work in their communities.

During the 2019 legislative session, North Dakota lawmakers included language in Senate Bill 2012
authorizing the division to establish and implement a certification program for peer support
specialists. This work supports the recommendation from the North Dakota Behavioral Health
System Study published April 2018 by the Human Services Research Institute.

“Peer support services have the potential to significantly improve the behavioral health system by
offering recovery support services in the community and producing cost savings from a reduction in
rates of hospitalization and incarceration,” Sagness said.

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The Department of Human Services’ Behavioral Health Division is responsible for reviewing and identifying service needs and activities in the state's behavioral health system to ensure health and safety and access to quality services. It also establishes quality assurance standards for the licensure of substance use disorder program services and facilities and provides policy leadership in partnership with public and private entities. For more information, visit www.behavioralhealth.nd.gov.

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