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Conference speakers focus on fostering safe and stable families, peer support

BISMARCK, N.D. – Improving stability, preventing crises and supporting recovery and well-being are the foundations for strong, stable North Dakota families.

The North Dakota Department of Human Services' Behavioral Health and Children and Family Services Conference continues today with presentations on various topics including the state's new child welfare practice model that focuses on keeping children safely at home with their families and the importance of peer support services for individuals in recovery. The conference is being held at the Bismarck Event Center and virtually by an online livestream.

"The focus on behavioral health and safe and stable families is more important now than ever," said Pamela Sagness, Behavioral Health Division director. "For many, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased stress, anxiety and depression."

Steven Samra of the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration is an expert on bringing recovery supports to scale, and will discuss the value of peer support at 11 a.m.

Peer support services have grown in North Dakota. Since 2018, the department's Behavioral Health Division has trained over 450 peer support specialists to share their lived experience and support others in recovery. Peer support specialists share strategies and help connect individuals to services and community resources. The division has also developed and implemented a peer support certification program.

At 12:30 p.m., long-time child welfare professional Matt Gebhardt from Casey Family Programs will discuss North Dakota's new safety framework practice model that uses time-tested intervention strategies to support parents in making positive changes that help keep their children safe. Child welfare professionals at the human service zone offices have received training on the model, which was implemented in December 2020.

"Strong coordination between agencies and within communities is often the difference between success and failure when trying to solve complex challenges," said Executive Policy Director Jessica Thomasson. "This conference is a great example of people in North Dakota coming together to continue to improve outcomes."

Individuals can learn more and register for today's presentations at www.behavioralhealth.nd.gov/conference. Over 800 people have registered for the two-day conference hosted by the department.

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