



2026

Behavioral Health & Children and Family Services Conference

Sept. 14-17, 2026

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Health & Human Services

#Renew2026



A special message from our state leadership



On behalf of the State of North Dakota, it is our pleasure to welcome you to the 2026 Behavioral Health & Children and Family Services Conference.

Thank you for the important work you do each day for the children, families and individuals of North Dakota. Your dedication strengthens our communities and helps build a healthier, stronger future for our state.

We hope this conference provides a chance to connect with colleagues, celebrate progress and return home renewed for the work ahead.

Governor Kelly Armstrong



It is an honor to welcome you to the 2026 Behavioral Health & Children and Family Services Conference on behalf of the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services.

This year's theme – Renew – invites us to pause, learn from one another and look ahead. I encourage you to make the most of this time to share ideas, build connections and discover new approaches that can strengthen the work happening in communities across North Dakota.

Thank you for your commitment to this work. I hope you leave this conference with new ideas, renewed energy and a strong sense of purpose.

Commissioner Conner Swanson

**This event may
be livestreamed,
photographed or
recorded.**

There will be photographers and videographers on site capturing images for NDHHS to use for promotional, educational and informational purposes. By entering this event, you consent to being photographed, filmed and/or recorded for any NDHHS purpose.

Conference Schedule

Pre-Conference:

Monday, Sept. 14

Pre-Conference: Thad Shunkwiler

Time: 1:00 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.

Room: Prairie Rose 101-103

Compassionate Accountability: Pushing Pre-Licensed Clinicians to Be Better

Supervision is more than just a requirement for licensure-it is a critical responsibility that shapes the next generation of behavioral health professionals. This session will challenge supervisors to embrace Compassionate Accountability-a balanced approach that fosters both support and growth. Whether you are a seasoned supervisor or new to the role, this workshop will equip you with practical tools to lead with both heart and high standards.

Welcome:

Tuesday Sept. 15

Child-Centered, Family-Focused, Shared Accountability – The Work of the North Dakota Children’s Cabinet

The North Dakota Children’s Cabinet is establishing itself as credible partner in solving complex issues while also elevating best practices happening across our great state. This session will highlight the Cabinet’s year in review, the importance of cross-system partnerships, how we are working to align state and local efforts, all focused around initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for youth and families. Participants will leave with a clearer understanding of how the Cabinet’s efforts intersect with schools and your local communities.

Day 1: Tuesday, Sept. 15

8:30 a.m. – 9:15 a.m.

Hall A

Welcome

Child-Centered, Family-Focused, Shared Accountability –
The Work of the North Dakota Children's Cabinet
Lt. Governor Michelle Strinden & Senator Kathy Hogan

9:15 a.m. – 10:15 a.m.

Keynote 1: Fields of Stress: Breaking the Silence on Rural and Agricultural Mental Health
Thad Shunkwiler

10:15 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.

Break (exhibits & networking)

10:30 a.m. – 12 p.m.

Hall A

Breakout 1:

Alcohol, Cannabis and
Mental Health: The
Importance and Value of
Prevention with Adolescents
and Young Adults
Jason Kilmer

Prairie Rose 101 – 103

Breakout 2:

Sufficient Information
Collection
Heather Kohls

Prairie Rose 104 – 105

Breakout 3:

Safety 360
Robin Pendleton

12 p.m. – 1:30 p.m.

Lunch (on your own)

1:30 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.

Hall A

Keynote 2: Tsunami of Suicide: Understanding and Supporting
People through Grief and Trauma
Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas

2:30 p.m. – 2:45 p.m.

Break (exhibits & networking)

2:45 p.m. – 3:45 p.m.

Hall A

Breakout 4:

Power of Neurodiversity:
Understanding the
Superpowers of
Neurodifferences
Dr. Blake Gilbert

Prairie Rose 101 – 103

Breakout 5:

Perinatal Mental
Health Disorders and
Attachment: Implications
for Early Relationships
Natalie Reiter

Prairie Rose 104 – 105

Breakout 6:

Medical Marijuana
and Behavioral Health:
Benefit, Risk, and Clinical
Reality
Thad Shunkwiler

3:45 p.m. – 4 p.m.

Break (exhibits & networking)

4 p.m. – 5 p.m.

Hall A

Keynote 3: Power of Moral Narrative
Rev. Timothy McMahan King

Day 2: Wednesday, Sept. 16

	Hall A		
8:30 a.m. – 9:30 a.m.	Keynote 4: PUSH: Persevere Until Something Happens Dr. John Gaines		
9:30 a.m. – 9:45 a.m.	Break (exhibits & networking)		
	Hall A	Prairie Rose 101–103	Prairie Rose 104–105
9:45 a.m. – 11:15 a.m.	Breakout 7: Strengthening Protective Factors for Youth and Families Impacted by Substance Use and Mental Health Challenges Dr. John Gaines	Breakout 8: Serving Those who Served: An Introduction to Providing Culturally Humble and Evidence-Based Care to the Veteran Population Josh Seezs	Breakout 9: When We Do What We Don't Want To Do Rev. Timothy McMahan King
11:15 a.m. – 12:45 p.m.	Lunch (provided in Hall B), awards and sponsor messages (Hall A)		
	Hall A	Prairie Rose 101–103	Prairie Rose 104–105
12:45 p.m. – 2:15 p.m.	Breakout 10: Courage Wins: Helping Kids Navigate Conflict, Drama and Bullying Online and Offline Erin Walsh	Breakout 11: Safety Plan Analysis and Sufficient Safety Plans Heather Kohls	Breakout 12: Identifying Early Psychosis: Practical Screening and Assessment Tools for Behavioral Health Providers Dr. Tully
2:30 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.	Visit exhibitors (closing at 4 p.m. today), network with attendees and shop book sales and signings.		
	Hall A		
3:45 p.m. – 5 p.m.	Keynote 5: Beyond Trauma-Informed: Reclaiming Healing as a Collective, Cultural and Community Practice Patti Heffernan		

Day 3: Thursday, Sept. 17

	Hall A		
8:30 a.m. – 9:30 a.m.	Keynote 6: Hidden in Plain Sight: Familial Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) in ND Kate Price		
9:30 a.m. – 9:45 a.m.	Transition break		
	Hall A	Prairie Rose 101–103	Prairie Rose 104–105
9:45 a.m. – 10:45 a.m.	Breakout 13: The Eyes Can't See What the Brain Doesn't Know: Human Trafficking in North Dakota Panel facilitated by Kate LePage	Breakout 14: A Heuristic Approach: Keeping Families Together in the Face of Addiction Patti Heffernan	Breakout 15: Introduction to The ASAM Criteria, Fourth Edition, Volume 2: Adolescents and Transition Aged Youth Andrea Boxill
10:45 a.m. – 11 a.m.	Transition break		
	Hall A		
11 a.m. – 12 p.m.	Keynote 7: Under Pressure: Stress, Thinking Traps and Resilience Erin Walsh		
12 p.m. – 1 p.m.	Lunch (on your own)		
	Prairie Rose 101–103		
1 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.	Post-Conference: Ethical Practice Across Systems: Navigating Complex Decisions in Multidisciplinary Teams Katie Krukenberg		

Keynote Speakers



Fields of Stress: Breaking the Silence on Rural and Agricultural Mental Health

Keynote 1 – Thad Shunkwiler

Farmers and rural communities face unique mental health challenges, from financial uncertainty and unpredictable weather to social isolation and the weight of generational expectations. Despite these pressures, stigma and limited access to care often prevent individuals from seeking support. By fostering open conversations and expanding mental health resources, we can break down stigma and ensure that those who feed the world receive the support they need.



Tsunami of Suicide: Understanding and Supporting People through Grief and Trauma

Keynote 2 – Dr. Sally Spencer-Thomas

Losing someone to suicide sends a tsunami of grief and trauma through families, communities and workplaces. Behavioral health professionals supporting people bereaved by suicide often find themselves navigating uncharted territory - helping others cope with complicated grief, survivor's guilt and trauma responses while also managing their own biases, fears and compassion fatigue. The session combines theory with practice through understanding the unique nature of suicide grief and exploring the lived experience of loss.

Supported by **HHS Suicide Prevention** advancing efforts to strengthen suicide prevention, promote healing after suicide loss, and build the capacity of communities and behavioral health professionals to respond after a loss with compassion and evidence-informed support.



Power of Moral Narrative

Keynote 3 – Rev. Timothy McMahan King

The stories we tell shape how we see the world. This session explores how the moral narratives we adopt regarding drugs and the people who use them have the power to help or harm. By analyzing the intersection of faith, science and addiction, this keynote calls for an end to a culture of punishment in favor of healing.



PUSH: Persevere Until Something Happens

Keynote 4 – Dr. John Gaines

Dr. Gaines shares his journey from hopelessness to hope and his drive to uplift others. His story earned him the nickname “PUSH” (Persevere Until Something Happens), reflecting his belief in the power of perseverance. He encourages others to embrace resilience, overcome obstacles with love and strive to become their best selves.



Beyond Trauma-Informed: Reclaiming Healing as a Collective, Cultural and Community Practice

Keynote 5 – Patti Heffernan

For years, the field has relied on the language of trauma-informed care to signal awareness, compassion, and safety. In this keynote, Patti invites the audience to consider a necessary evolution: the shift from trauma-informed care toward Healing-Centered Engagement. Patti will reframe healing as a holistic, strengths-based and culturally grounded process, one that honors identity, belonging, joy and collective resilience alongside pain. This keynote is not about abandoning trauma-informed care—it is about finishing the work trauma-informed care began.



Hidden in Plain Sight: Familial Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) in ND

Keynote 6 – Kate Price

While advocates and policymakers have raised awareness of the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), little is known about familial CSEC. As a children’s rights advocate, researcher and survivor, Kate combines professional expertise and lived experience to expand understanding of familial CSEC.



Under Pressure: Stress, Thinking Traps and Resilience

Keynote 7 – Erin Walsh

Too often, resilience is framed as an individual trait—something we’re expected to conjure up on our own. Yet stress can trigger emotions and behaviors in children and adults that make communication, collaboration and connection harder when we need them most. This session explores common stress traps and three actionable, science-informed strategies to restore connection, support the well-being of professionals and children and strengthen our collective capacity to move forward.

Supported by **HHS PMHCA Grant** advancing efforts for training and education to support the treatment of children and adolescents with behavioral health conditions.

Breakout Sessions: Tuesday, Sept. 15

10:30 a.m. – 12 p.m.

Alcohol, Cannabis, and Mental Health: The Importance and Value of Prevention with Adolescents and Young Adults

Breakout 1 – Jason Kilmer

Research has put a spotlight on alcohol-related risk factors for suicide, and emerging research has demonstrated the numerous ways in which cannabis can impact mental health. This session will review the science surrounding the ways in which substance use and mental health outcomes are related, look closely at emerging research related to cannabis and wellbeing and highlight how what we do about substance use pays dividends related to mental health, student success and other outcomes.

Sufficient Information Collection

Breakout 2 – Heather Kohls

Information collection is an ongoing, dynamic process that is the foundation for child safety decision-making throughout the life of a child welfare case. This session will explore engagement strategies to reduce resistance and interviewing techniques that support gathering information about parent/caregiver protective capacities and how information collection and analysis evolves over time.

Safety 360

Breakout 3 – Robin Pendleton

This comprehensive safety training equips workers with the ability to navigate potential risks throughout their workday. From the moment they receive a case to its closure, the training covers both in-office procedures and safe practices for home visits. By the end, participants will have the knowledge and skills to confidently handle various situations and minimize risks to ensure their safety.

2:45 p.m. – 3:45 p.m.

Power of Neurodiversity: Understanding the Superpowers of Neurodifferences³

Breakout 4 – Dr. Blake Gilbert

Often when we treat children and families with neurodiversity characteristics, the focus is naturally on all the negative/maladaptive aspects of their life. Therefore, it is easy to miss the adaptive aspects that can be utilized in the work with these individuals and families. This session will focus on the “superpowers” of neurodifferences that can be added to any treatment plan to assist these youth and families in navigating the world.

Perinatal Mental Health Disorders and Attachment: Implications for Early Relationships¹

Breakout 5 – Natalie Reiter

Perinatal Mental Health Disorders can significantly impact early attachment, parent–infant bonding, and relational safety during critical developmental windows. This session expands on PMHD foundations by examining how untreated or under-treated perinatal mental health conditions affect attachment patterns, caregiver responsiveness and infant emotional development.

Medical Marijuana and Behavioral Health: Benefit, Risk and Clinical Reality

Breakout 6 – Thad Shunkwiler

Cannabis is increasingly promoted as a solution for anxiety, depression, trauma, ADHD and other behavioral health concerns. Yet public perceptions often outpace the science, leaving clinicians, families and communities to navigate emerging evidence and widespread misinformation. This session examines the current evidence on cannabis and behavioral health, highlighting where research supports its use, where concerns remain and what clinicians need to know about potential risks and benefits.

^{1 2 3 4} Session sponsors. See the next page for sponsor details.

Breakout Sessions: Wednesday, Sept. 16

9:45 a.m. – 11:15 a.m.

Strengthening Protective Factors for Youth and Families Impacted by Substance Use and Mental Health Challenges²

Breakout 7 – Dr. John Gaines

This session focuses on strengthening protective factors for youth and families impacted by substance use and mental health challenges. Through an approach centered on vision, identity, belief and the role of trusted adults, Dr. Gaines will discuss how these reduce risky behaviors, including underage drinking.

Serving Those who Served: An Introduction to Providing Culturally Humble and Evidence – Based Care to the Veteran Population

Breakout 8 – Josh Seezs

Veterans have their own culture and rich life experiences that can present unique challenges and opportunities to civilian community mental health care providers. This session will provide an overview of what makes the Veteran population truly unique and will assist providers in understanding key aspects of the Veteran experience, helping to establish a connection, build trust and inform treatment planning.

When We Do What We Don't Want To Do

Breakout 9 – Rev. Timothy McMahan King

The negative consequences of drug addiction can make headline news, but haven't we all felt stuck in our own patterns of behavior or thinking that we wish we could change? Timothy will share his own story of struggling with an opioid addiction and what he learned about the science of change. This session will explore how ancient insights from moral philosophers can help us all understand and address how and why people change.

12:45 p.m. – 2:15 p.m.

Courage Wins: Helping Kids Navigate Conflict, Drama and Bullying Online and Offline¹

Breakout 10 – Erin Walsh

While bullying has long been an unfortunate part of growing up, today the barriers are lower and the stakes are higher. Learning how to navigate everyday conflict is an essential part of healthy development. In this session, Erin will help professionals distinguish between bullying, conflict and social drama and explains why these differences matter while sharing concrete strategies to help young people disrupt bullying, navigate conflict with skill and practice emotional courage when it matters most.

Safety Plan Analysis and Sufficient Safety Plans

Breakout 11 – Heather Kohls

Safety plans are a crucial - but high-stakes - tool in child protection work. Developing effective safety plans requires careful analysis of what is both necessary and feasible within each unique family to manage impending danger. This session will explore the key aspects of sufficient safety plans and examine how the safety determination analysis questions are used to rule in or rule out in-home safety plans.

Identifying Early Psychosis: Practical Screening and Assessment Tools for Behavioral Health Providers⁴

Breakout 12 – Dr. Tully

Early identification of psychosis significantly improves treatment outcomes, yet many behavioral health providers receive limited training in recognizing and assessing early psychosis symptoms. This session will provide practical tools for integrating psychosis screening and assessment into routine intake and evaluation, as well as referral strategies for connecting individuals to specialized early psychosis services.

^{1 2 3 4} Session sponsors. See the next page for sponsor details.

Breakout Sessions:

Thursday, Sept. 17

10:30 a.m. – 12 p.m.

The Eyes Can't See What the Brain Doesn't Know: Human Trafficking in North Dakota

Breakout 13 – Panel facilitated by Kate LePage

Human trafficking exists in communities across North Dakota, yet it often goes unrecognized because the signs are misunderstood or overlooked. This panel discussion will explore the realities of trafficking in our state, challenge common misconceptions and help participants identify red flags, risk factors and indicators of both labor and sex trafficking. Participants will gain practical knowledge to recognize potential trafficking situations, engage using a trauma-informed approach and better support individuals who may be experiencing exploitation.

A Heuristic Approach: Keeping Families Together in the Face of Addiction

Breakout 14 – Patti Heffernan

Imagine a world where substance use disorder is not the fault of the afflicted and families recover together. This session breaks down how SUD gets passed from generation to generation and walks through how some well-meaning approaches and interventions may be perpetuating the continuation of generational SUD.

Introduction to The ASAM Criteria, Fourth Edition, Volume 2: Adolescents and Transition Aged Youth

Breakout 15 – Andrea Boxill

The ASAM Criteria, Fourth Edition, Volume 2 is the first of its kind in youth addiction and mental health care as a groundbreaking resource designed to meet an urgent national need by providing developmentally specific guidance for identifying risk, determining the appropriate level of care and coordinating treatment for young people. This session will explore how the forthcoming edition addresses the changing landscape of youth and young adult substance use and mental health care—and why these shifts offer renewed hope for improving long term outcomes for young people.

Session Sponsor

¹Supported by **HHS PMHCA Grant**

advancing efforts for training and education to support the treatment of children and adolescents with behavioral health conditions.

²Supported by **HHS Partnership for Success (PFS) Project**

to strengthen protective factors for youth and families impacted by substance use and mental health challenges across North Dakota.

³Supported by **HHS PMHCA Grant**

advancing efforts to increase the capacity of primary care providers to screen, diagnose and treat children for behavioral health disorders in primary care settings.

⁴Supported by **HHS First Episode Psychosis**

to advance and strengthen early psychosis services across North Dakota.

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including those represented on this page as well as through promotional videos and presentations at lunch on Wednesday.

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PEER SUPPORT

Is Changing Behavioral Health



PSAND is here to help North Dakota understand, support, and advance Peer Support.

Peer Support Alliance of North Dakota connects peers, employers, organizations, and communities through:

Education & CEUs

Peer Networks & Support

Advocacy & Voice

Workforce Resources

Whether you employ peers, work alongside them, or want to better understand the role—connect with PSAND.

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Continuing Education

- The 2026 Behavioral Health & Children and Family Services Conference has been approved for continuing education units through:
- ND Board of Social Work Examiners
- ND Board of Addiction Counselor Examiners
- ND Board of Counseling Examiners
- ND Peer Support Specialists
- ND Foster Parents
- ND State Board of Psychologist Examiners

Receiving Your CEUs

In-person

Continuing Education Forms are available at the registration area.

At the end of each day, complete the CEU form indicating the sessions you attended. Signatures are required from a conference team member as attestation of attendance for licensing boards.

At the end of the conference, please leave the first page (front) of this form in designated area and keep the second page (back) of this form as the “certificate of attendance” for your records.

This form is your certificate of attendance, individuals are responsible for keeping this copy for their records. You will not receive anything additional verifying attendance.

Virtual

Login to the virtual Conference Hub through an internet browser to view virtual sessions.

Near the end of the conference, you will receive an email with a link to select the sessions you attended. Once you submit that form, you will receive an email certificate for your records.

Individuals seeking continuing education units are responsible for keeping this email certificate for their records.

CE Broker

If you are utilizing CE Broker to track your continuing education the tracking number for the conference is #20-1393896



Questions

If you have any questions throughout the conference, please look for a conference team member with a “STAFF” lanyard!



Lunch/Snacks

- Lunch is on your own Tuesday and Thursday. Wednesday's lunch will be provided in Hall B.
- Coffee and break stations can be found in Hall B. Water towers are located within Hall B and the Prairie Rose Rooms.



WIFI

1. Click on BIS_Guest.
2. Click "Create Account."
 - Enter your name and email address.
 - Click the box to accept the terms of use.
 - Click "Register."
 - Your email address will be your username.
 - You will be presented with a 6-digit code for your password.
3. This information can be used for the next 24 hours if you leave the building.



Handouts

Session materials for the sessions can be downloaded on the virtual Conference Hub.



One-Time Registration

Once you have received your name badge you are checked-in for the remaining days of the conference.



Hashtag

Use the conference hashtag, #Renew2026 to help spread the word about the event, things you are learning and people you are networking with!



Exhibitors and Sponsors

Thank you to our conference exhibitors and sponsors. Please be sure to visit the exhibit booths in Hall B during your time at the conference. Booths will be open Tuesday 7:30 a.m. – 5 p.m. and Wednesday from 7:30 a.m. – 4 p.m.

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