

**Board of Vocational Rehabilitation (BVR)
Organizational Application for Funding**

Application

Agency/Organization Name: South Dakota Parent Connection

Organizational Contact Person: Dr. Carla Miller

Address: 3701 West 49th Street, Suite 102

City, State, Zip Code: Sioux Falls, SD 57106

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Email Address: cmiller@sdparent.org

Check one of the following:

Public agency, which provides vocational rehabilitation services for individuals with disabilities.

Disability related organization, which provides technical information or other assistance for individuals with disabilities.

Other, please identify: _____

This project/event falls under which of the following appropriate uses of available funds:

Marketing and outreach Sponsorship of an event
 Studies and analysis Emerging project training

Amount you are requesting? \$ 2,000

Title of Project/Event: Lighting The Way Conference on Autism

Date of Event: June 4 & 5, 2026 Location: Sioux Falls, SD

Have you received assistance from the BVR before? Yes No

If yes, when did you last receive assistance? 2023 Amount received \$ 2,000

By signing below, I verify that the information provided is accurate to the best of my knowledge.

Signature of authorized person/contact of agency or organization:

Dr. Carla Miller Date: 1/28/26

BUDGET JUSTIFICATION

Description	Requested BVR Funds	Match From Applicant	Match From Other Resources	Total Project Budget
Trainer/Speaker Fees (includes travel and other expenses)	\$2,000		\$5,000	\$7,000
Meeting Room Rental				In-Kind
Equipment Needs				In-Kind
Advertising Costs			\$250	\$250 & In-Kind
OTHER		\$1,000		\$1,000
GRAND TOTAL	\$2,000	\$1,000	\$5,250	\$8,250

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Abstract

How will your project/event promote vocational rehabilitation opportunities for individuals with disabilities in South Dakota? *Lighting the Way: Autism Spectrum in Our Community* Conference: Theme: Autism: What Now? Moving Forward Together.

South Dakota Parent Connection, in collaboration with Augustana University, the Sioux Falls School District, Sanford School of Medicine USD Center for Disabilities, LifeScape, South Dakota Vocational Rehabilitation, and self-advocate volunteers will host a conference on Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). We expect to host potentially 200 conference participants consisting of educators, families, service providers, support personnel, community members, and persons with an ASD from across the Midwest region. Evaluation surveys from the June 2025 conference indicated the importance for continuing this learning and networking conference on ASD. Participants report that there is not another conference such as this available in our area and they appreciate it being held in the summer. Participant comments indicate a need for additional information on transitioning to adult services, work/job/school/social opportunities beyond K-12, and strategies for working with individuals with ASD, especially strategies to manage behavior and support for wellbeing and developing critical home/school/therapy partnerships.

The conference will be centering the sessions under the umbrella of this year's theme: *Autism: What Now? Moving Forward Together*, will offer a wide array of sessions for all attendees. Conference coordinators include Becky Fiala, Megan Wiessner, Lindsay Wyatt, Dr. Krislyn Carlson and Dr. Julie Ashworth, from Augustana University; Carla Miller, Executive Director of South Dakota Parent Connection; Denise Kennedy, Sioux Falls Public Schools; Emily Meier, USD Center for Disabilities Autism Spectrum Disorders Program; Aimee Deliramich, USD Center for Disabilities; Dylan Platt, Sanford Genetic Counseling; Dr. Keena Melville, SDSU; Stephanie Busjahn, Division of Developmental Disabilities; Christi Henderson, SD Division of Rehabilitation Services; Jeanie Utle and Beth Wienhold, LifeScape; Lisa Bannwarth, school psychologist/community member; Myriah Ventura/mother & self-advocate, Sam Wessels, LEND and self-advocate.

The ultimate goal of the conference is both retention of attendees from previous years and attraction of new conference participants so that we can raise awareness in the region about ASD, provide professional development and training, and continue collaboration among the various entities serving individuals with ASD and their families. The evaluation plan will be a conference evaluation and the SD Council on Developmental Disabilities Consumer Satisfaction Survey. The total cost of the conference is \$8,250 plus in-kind (see attached budget sheet). The total amount of funds requested from the Board of Vocational Rehabilitation is \$2,000.

Please explain the purpose of the project or activity:

This event will deliver evidence-based training, practical tools, and meaningful connections to improve outcomes for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), their families, and those who support them across the lifespan. Participants will gain actionable strategies that can be applied in educational settings, workplaces, family systems, and community environments. The central focus of the conference is supporting successful transitions in critical life areas, including education, employment, health, and independent living. Attendees will also be connected to key state and community resources-such as South Dakota Vocational Rehabilitation Services-that support individuals with ASD in achieving meaningful, self-directed, and inclusive lives.

The prevalence of ASD in our community continues to increase. Service providers in the Sioux Falls area (including representatives from the Sanford School of Medicine USD Center for Disabilities, Sioux Falls Public Schools and area districts, Southeastern Behavioral Health Care, South Dakota Parent Connection, LifeScape, and Children's Home Society), who are serving individuals with ASD across the age spectrum, continue to experience increased requests for appropriate evaluation, identification, and

programming at all age levels. During the past year, conversations with various service providers have indicated the increased need for staff and families to have additional training in ASD. These service providers/families express grave concerns about the impact of ASDs for individuals and their families and the need to engage the community as well as educators. Appropriate training for pre-K to post-secondary educators, adult service providers, employers, first responders, and community members continues to be a concern. Key areas of concern include wellness & health, education, partnerships; behavioral management, social thinking, early intervention, person centered thinking, transition services to post-secondary or other vocational experiences, and vocational and employment opportunities in addition to family and care provider support and education.

Autism is a complex neurobiological disorder that lasts throughout a person's lifetime. It occurs in all racial, ethnic, and social groups and is four times more likely to impact boys than girls. Autism affects a person's ability to communicate and relate to others. The demands for evaluation and training in South Dakota are increasing, and collaborative efforts are needed from the standpoint of human and financial resources. The *Lighting the Way: Autism Spectrum Disorders in Our Community* Conference brings together the various facets of the community and provides the opportunity to learn together and develop collaborative strategies for meeting the diverse needs of individuals with ASD and their families.

Believing that awareness and education are important tools in serving individuals and their families, the sponsors are committed to bringing nationally recognized presenters to South Dakota. It is important to note that the keynote speakers are professionals who either have an ASD and/or are internationally recognized leaders in the field.

Please specify how funds will be utilized (i.e., speaker fees/mileage; meeting room costs); or identify the specific activities for which the funds are requested: The sponsorship, if approved, will be utilized for the fees and travel expenses related to the conference keynote speakers. This year, the conference will feature nationally recognized keynote speakers:

Jesse Horn, Self Advocate, is an American sport stacker, author, and motivational speaker who was diagnosed with autism at age three and discovered his passion for sport stacking in 2006 after seeing a television commercial for Speed Stacks cups.^[1] This visual-motor coordination sport, involving the rapid building and dismantling of cup pyramids, transformed his life by providing focus, confidence, and a pathway to international competition, where he has represented Team USA in multiple World Sport Stacking Championships, earning international titles and top placements such as 14th overall in 2012.^{[2][3]} Horn, originally from Buffalo City, Wisconsin, now uses his experiences to inspire others through motivational presentations and his 2020 autobiography *Stacked Against the Odds: Life with Autism and How a Unique Sport Changed My Life*, emphasizing resilience and the power of pursuing passions despite challenges associated with autism

David S. Geslak, President and Founder of Exercise Connection. As a Fitness Coordinator at a school for children with autism, Coach Dave experienced first-hand the challenges of teaching exercise. By understanding that students with autism learn differently, he developed a system that has become a breakthrough in effectively teaching exercise. Nine universities have incorporated his program into their Adapted Physical Education and Special Education Programs. As a pioneer in the field, Dave gives his insightful and inspiring presentations around the world, including, Egypt, Dubai, Barbados, Russia and Canada. Coach Dave is also a published author, writes Autism & Exercise research articles, and has a TV Show "Coach Dave" on the Autism Channel.

Coach Dave graduated from the University of Iowa with a degree in Health Promotion. He is a Certified Exercise Physiologist from the American College of Sports Medicine and a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist from the National Strength and Conditioning Association. He is a former assistant strength and conditioning coach for the University of Iowa Football Program

and co-founder/President of Right Fit. He is also a member of the State of Illinois Autism Taskforce.

The two-day conference will offer more than 25 breakout sessions that will include local, regional, and statewide presenters covering a wide variety of topics across the key strands: autism basics, mental health, caregiver/sibling support, and program services and supports. The SD Council on Developmental Disabilities has also approved funding. Augustana University will provide conference space and technology at no cost. South Dakota Parent Connection will be providing scholarships in the amount of \$1,000 available to parents unable to pay the registration fee of \$100. The registration fees will generate the balance of funds needed for the conference.

Who is the target audience, including the number of people to be involved or impacted? The Lighting the Way Autism Conference is expected to engage approximately 200 participants from across South Dakota and the surrounding Midwest region. The target audience includes individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as well as those who support them through educational, vocational, healthcare, and community systems. Attendees will include vocational rehabilitation counselors, transition specialists, educators, adult service professionals, social workers, therapists, psychologists, employers, parents and caregivers, support personnel, and other community members. The conference is intentionally designed to address the needs of both individuals with disabilities and the professionals and family members who support successful transitions, employment, and community inclusion.

Please provide a brief description of the expected benefits for the attendees: Attendees will gain access to evidence-based training and current best practices related to autism spectrum disorder, transition planning, employment, and adult services. Participants will develop practical skills and strategies that can be applied across educational, vocational, and community settings. The conference provides structured opportunities to connect with subject-matter experts, vocational rehabilitation representatives, and service providers, increasing awareness of available supports and resources. In addition, attendees will benefit from dedicated networking time, including information booths and facilitated opportunities between sessions and meals, which promote collaboration, peer learning, and shared problem-solving among individuals with disabilities, families, professionals, and community partners.