

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

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Agency/Organization Name: South Dakota Parent Connection

Address: 3701 West 49th Street, Suite 102

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

Phone Number: (605) 361-3171

Email Address: cmiller@sdparent.org

Title of Project/Event: Lighting The Way Conference on Autism 2026

Date & Location of Event: June 4 & 5, 2026

Please specify how funds were utilized (i.e., speaker fees/mileage; meeting room costs, stipend assistance).

The Board of Vocational Rehabilitation sponsorship funds were used specifically to support expenses associated with the keynote speaker fees and travel expenses for the 17th Annual Lighting the Way Autism Conference. The conference featured nationally recognized keynote speakers Jesse Horn, an autistic self-advocate, author, and motivational speaker, and David Geslak, founder of Exercise Connection and an internally recognized leader in autism fitness and wellness.

This funding support helped offset conference costs to keep registration affordable and accessible for individuals with disabilities, family members, and professionals throughout South Dakota.

What was offered through the training sessions or conference, in general (i.e., examples of sessions, breakout sessions)?

The Lighting the Way Autism Conference provided two full days of educational sessions focused on supporting individuals with autism spectrum disorder across the lifespan. The conference featured two keynote presentations and more than 25 breakout sessions covering a wide range of topics.

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Examples of sessions included:

- Transition to Adulthood: Ready for What's Next
- Alternatives to Guardianship
- Introduction to Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Assistive Technology to Support Reading, Writing and Math
- Communication and AAC Across the Lifespan
- Section 504 and Educational Supports
- Social Skills Training
- Autism and Co-Occurring Conditions
- Sensory Supports and Challenging Behaviors
- Caregiver Collaboration and Family Support
- Fitness, Wellness and Regulation Skills
- Self-Advocate and Family Panel Discussions

The conference intentionally included sessions for self-advocates, families, educators, healthcare professionals, and community providers, ensuring that attendees could select learning opportunities most relevant to their needs.

How did your project/event promote vocational rehabilitation opportunities for individuals with disabilities in South Dakota?

The conference featured a dedicated presentation on Transition to adulthood, which addressed practical strategies for supporting individuals with disabilities addressing self-advocacy, independence, post-secondary education, community inclusion, and employment supports. The conference also included presentations from professionals with expertise in employment services and transition planning.

In addition, the South Dakota Department of Human Services Division of Rehabilitation Services and South Dakota Parent Connection were conference sponsors, exhibitors, and representation on the planning committee. Attendees had opportunities to connect directly with vocational rehabilitation professionals and learn about services available to help individuals with disabilities prepare for, obtain, and maintain meaningful employment. Employment and post-secondary success were also highlighted during sessions such as "Transition to Adulthood" and through the experiences shared by autistic self-advocates and panelists.

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Please describe audience makeup if applicable (number of individuals with disabilities, family members, providers, others).

The 2026 conference welcomed 154 participants from communities across South Dakota and the surrounding Midwest region. Attendees represented a diverse audience of individuals who support and advocate for people with autism spectrum disorder. Among those who provided demographic information on the conference evaluation, 29% identified as parents or family members of an individual with autism, 24% were service providers, 22% were educators, and 6% were self-advocates. An additional 19% of participants chose not to provide information about their role on the evaluation form.

If you have evaluation results from attendees, please provide a summary of findings:

Fifty three percent (53%) of attendees completed the conference evaluation, which is above the standard response rate.

The 2026 Lighting the Way Autism Conference received overwhelmingly positive feedback from attendees. Overall evaluation results demonstrated that the conference was successful in increasing knowledge, providing relevant information, and promoting future advocacy and community engagement for individuals with autism and their families.

Of the respondents completing the overall conference evaluation:

- **91%** agreed or strongly agreed that the conference was engaging and provided them with valuable knowledge.
- **82%** agreed or strongly agreed that the information presented was relevant and useful.
- **82%** agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the conference to others.

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Attendees also reported meaningful personal outcomes from participating in the conference:

- **100%** of respondents reported being treated with respect during the conference.
- **97%** indicated they were satisfied with the conference.
- **97%** reported that their lives were better because of the conference experience.
- **85%** stated they could do more things in their community as a result of attending.
- **77%** reported increased knowledge of their rights.
- **77%** indicated they planned to increase their advocacy activities because of their participation.
- **92%** stated they were better able to express what they want, identify needed supports, and advocate for important services as a result of the conference.

Individual sessions also received exceptionally strong ratings. Both keynote speakers were highly rated for being knowledgeable, engaging, and presenting information that was relevant and useful. Jesse Horn's, *Stacked Against the Odds*, and David Geslak's *Empowering Inclusion: Advancing Fitness for Every Body, Everywhere* received 100% "agree / strongly agree" ratings for relevance and usefulness.

Breakout sessions covering transition to adulthood, self-advocacy, autism family experiences, assistive technology, educational supports, communication, social skills, and caregiver collaboration consistently received ratings of "Agree" or "Strongly Agree," demonstrating that the conference successfully addressed the diverse needs of individuals with autism, family members, educators, vocational rehabilitation professionals, and community providers.

Participant comments further reinforced the value of the conference and the impact it has on families and professionals alike. One attendee shared, *"Always find new ideas when I come. Thank you!"* Another parent commented, *"Thank you for putting this on and we learn how to advocate for our daughter."* A first-time attendee wrote, *"This was my first autism training. I loved that we got to change classes. The classes were so interesting and great presenters,"* while another shared simply, *"First time attending - learning so much."*

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Educators also highlighted the practical value of the conference. One participant stated, *"I really appreciated the wide variety of topics. As a teacher, there have been many times when I felt a little lost and I always can make connections with the information provided at LTW! Which helps those lost moments feel a lot easier!"* Another attendee expressed appreciation for the return to a two-day format, sharing, *"Thank you for bringing back the 2 day conference!"*

Overall, evaluation findings confirm that the Lighting the Way Autism Conference continues to provide an important learning and networking opportunity that increases knowledge, strengthens advocacy skills, promotes community participation, and supports successful transitions to adulthood, employment, and inclusive community living for individuals with disabilities throughout South Dakota.

Please identify any other information that you would like to share about your event.

The 17th Annual Lighting the Way Autism Conference emphasized the theme, *Autism: What Now? Moving Forward Together*. The conference highlighted the importance of collaboration among individuals with disabilities, families, educators, healthcare providers, and community organizations.

A significant strength of the conference was the inclusion of autistic self-advocates throughout the planning process and as featured presenters and panelists. Their perspectives enriched discussions on education, transition, employment, relationships, community inclusion, and self-determination.

The conference also provided opportunities for attendees to connect with community vendors and organizations offering services and supports throughout South Dakota. Through these partnerships, Lighting the Way continues to promote inclusion, empower families, and improve access to resources that help individuals with autism thrive across all stages of life.

Please submit completed form to:
Board of Vocational Rehabilitation
221 South Central Avenue Ste 33
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