

Schedule for MN Autism Symposium and Resource Fair: Building Resilience: Advancing Autism Acceptance, Mental Health, and Well-Being in Minnesota

Brief schedule:

8:30 AM - 9:00 AM: Registration & Welcome

9:00 AM - 9:45 AM: Opening Remarks

9:45 AM – 10:00 AM: Brief break

10:00 AM – 11:30 AM: Keynote Presentation and Panel: Bridging the Gap: Mental Health and Autism Across the Lifespan

11:30 AM - 12:30 PM: Resource Fair/ Lunch Break & Networking

12:30 PM - 3:30 PM: Breakout sessions and resource fair open

3:30 PM - 4:00 PM: Closing Remarks and raffle

Detailed schedule

8:30 AM - 9:00 AM: Registration & Welcome Coffee: Opportunity for attendees to network and browse resource fair.

9:00 AM - 9:45 AM: Opening Remarks

9:45 – 10:00 AM Brief break

10:00 AM – 11:30 AM: Keynote Presentation: *Bridging the Gap: Mental Health and Autism Across the Lifespan*

Keynote speaker: Adam Langenfeld is a board-certified Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrician in the Neurodevelopmental Services department at Children's Minnesota. He completed his graduate and medical degrees at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He then completed pediatric residency at Children's Wisconsin in Milwaukee, WI. Adam completed subspecialty training in Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrics at the University of Minnesota before starting at Children's Minnesota. Adam's special interests include early childhood development, working with children who have developmental delays, and working closely with families to promote the health and well-being of their children. In his free time, Adam enjoys spending time with his wife and children exploring local parks, farmers markets, and restaurants, as well as being physically active outdoors.

Join us for an inspiring keynote presentation that explores the intersection of mental health and autism, emphasizing strategies for fostering resilience and holistic well-being across the lifespan.

Drawing on the latest research and real-world examples, our keynote presentation will offer actionable insights and innovative solutions to bridge gaps in services, address stigma, and promote equitable access to mental health resources for individuals on the spectrum. Attendees will leave with a deeper understanding of the intersectionality of mental health and autism and practical strategies to support autistic individuals and families in diverse settings.

Panel Discussion: *Navigating Systems of Support: A Collaborative Approach to Mental Health and Autism*

In this engaging panel discussion, a diverse group of experts, including self-advocates, caregivers, clinicians, educators, and policymakers, will share their perspectives on navigating systems of support for neurodiverse individuals with co-occurring mental health needs. The panel will explore:

- Reducing the stigma associated with a diagnosis
- Stressors related to navigating supports and managing challenging behaviors
- Impact of sensory processing differences on mental health
- Promoting cultural competence and family-centered care
- Creating sensory-friendly environments and inclusive settings
- Advocating for policy changes to improve funding, accessibility, and integration of services.

Through an interactive Q&A session, attendees will have the opportunity to ask questions and learn from panelists' lived experiences, research insights, and professional expertise. This discussion aims to inspire collaboration, spark innovation, and equip participants with tools to advocate for comprehensive systems of care that address the unique needs of individuals with autism and mental health challenges. Neurodiverse individuals exhibit creativity, resilience, and unique ways of thinking that can foster positive mental health when strengths are celebrated and supported.

Panelists:

- **Deqa Farah** is a neurodivergent advocate, EIDBI provider, and former MN LEND Fellow. A graduate of Partners in Policymaking, she serves on the EIDBI Advisory Group and her district's Special Education Advisory Council, championing inclusive education and services. As a proud parent of an autistic child with complex communication needs, Deqa brings personal and professional insight to her work. With a background as a nurse and dietitian, she is committed to promoting culturally affirming care and empowering families.
- **Suad Ismail LPCC LADC**
- **Luz McCurry** (she/her pronouns) identifies herself as a Latina, a woman, a mom, and a veteran of the United States Air Force. With more than 15 years of experience in Human Services and years of expertise in higher education and healthcare, Luz has managed Medicaid and Medicare transitions for over 50,000 participants in Florida. Her passion for human services began as a

volunteer in a nonprofit organization working with foster children with autism, offering them engaging activities that matched their interests and establishing routines that would improve their social skills. Since then, Luz has worked as a Direct Support Professional, advocated for the people and families receiving assistance, and persisted in her efforts to improve the system by advocating for and providing services.

Luz has volunteered for organizations such as the American Red Cross, the American Heart Association, 4Kids, Family Voices of Minnesota, and Big Brothers, Big Sisters, as she continues to work on her personal passion for making a positive impact on her community.

One of Luz's two children, a 5-year-old on the autism spectrum, serves as both her inspiration and a reminder that more needs to be done to establish a safe community where everyone is welcomed despite their differences and obstacles. She plans to keep advocating for individuals with disabilities and look into new options and solutions for upcoming generations of service recipients.

Luz enjoys running, reading, biking, cooking, and playing with her kids.

- **Jennifer Merriam:** Jennifer (she/her/hers) is a freelance graphic designer, writer, and creative consultant for organizations with positive social missions. She is also passionate about early childhood education, special needs, voter engagement, and LGBTQ+ advocacy.
- **Mahdi Warsama** is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Somali Parents Autism Network (SPAN) and former Outreach Coordinator for the Somali Outreach Program at The Buckeye Ranch Inc in Columbus, OH. He has Master of Science in Security and Resilience Studies from Northeastern University in Boston, MA. He received his BA in TESOL and minor in political science from Kent State University at Kent, Ohio and later received mental health outreach training from the Rosemont Center and The Buckeye Ranch Inc. He has Certificate in Leadership in Human Services Management from Ohio State University College of Social Work. In his capacity as Outreach Coordinator for The Buckeye Ranch, Mahdi was a regular contributor to immigrant community forums and Somali cultural competency workshops. He served number of local boards, including Autism Society of Ohio, Franklin County Children Service Citizens Advisory Committee, Hilltop YMCA Board and Youth Development Committee, Office of Minority Health at Columbus Public Health-Minority Health Advisory Committee, Franklin County Sheriff Advisory Board, and Volunteers in Public Safety Support (VIPSS). He is also a co-founded and served as the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Masjid As-Salaamah Inc., a Somali majority mosque in Columbus, OH.

As a parent of a child with autism, Mahdi is strong advocate for children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). As part of his keen interest in neurodevelopmental disabilities and other related disabilities, he graduated from University of Minnesota's Leadership Education in

Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (MNLEND) Fellowship Program. Mahdi also graduated from Autism Society of Minnesota (AuSM) Direct Support Certification program.

He currently resides in north Minneapolis, MN. He can be contacted at his personal email mwarsama0@gmail.com or cell number at 614-270-3416.

11:30 AM - 12:30 PM: Resource Fair/ Lunch on your own & Networking

12:30 PM – 1:00 PM: Breakout Session 1: Taking the Stress out of Navigating Medical Assistance & Autism Services in Minnesota

Presenter: Nicole Berning, LBA, Clinical lead at Department of Human Services

Bio: Nicole Berning is a Licensed Behavior Analyst and works with the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) as the Autism Clinical Lead for the Early Intensive Developmental and Behavioral Intervention (EIDBI) benefit. Nicole currently provides consultation, training and technical assistance to early intervention providers across the state on EIDBI policies and procedures. She also helps manage the MN Autism Resource Portal website (mn.gov/autism), communications and social media accounts. In addition, she provides training to caregivers of children with ASD and related conditions on the services and supports available and how to access them. Her personal interest in this topic stems from her years of clinical experience working with families that were challenged to access early intervention services.

Description: Navigating Medical Assistance (MA) and autism services in Minnesota can be overwhelming due to complex systems, long wait times, and extensive paperwork. This presentation offers practical strategies, resources, and tips to help make the process more manageable. Participants will gain a clearer understanding of MA eligibility, autism-related services, waivers, and advocacy resources; empowering them to access support for themselves or their children with less stress.

1:00 – 1:30 PM Breakout Session 2: Tele-Outreach Center and Telehealth to Improve Access to Care in Minnesota

Presenter: Jessica Simacek, PhD

Description: Children on the autism spectrum and their families often face barriers to accessing services, leading to delays and missed opportunities for evaluation and intervention, particularly in Greater Minnesota. Telehealth can improve access and quality of care, though it should be used as part of a comprehensive care model. The Tele-Outreach Center at the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration focuses on research, training, and technical assistance to overcome care access barriers. This presentation will explore how telehealth can help Minnesota families and discuss tools like Project ECHO to expand provider training in Greater Minnesota.

1:30 – 2:00 Breakout session 3: Bridging the Gap: Strengthening Collaboration Between Schools and Community-Based Services

Presenters: Nicole Berning MS, LBA, Clinical Lead—MN Department of Human Services and Dr. Erin Farrell EdD, BCBA, Autism Specialist – MN Department of Education

Bio: Dr. Erin Farrell (she/hers/Dr.) is an adjunct professor at the University of St. Thomas in the department of special education and the Autism Specialist for the Minnesota Department of Education. Prior to her work in these roles, Dr. Farrell worked as a licensed ASD teacher and Board-Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) supporting students and systemic positive behavior interventions and support (PBIS) across districts as a District Behavior Specialist. Dr. Farrell has over 20 years of experience supporting individuals with ASD across school, home, clinical, and community settings. After being in the field for many years, she has now also gained the incredible experience of having a child diagnosed with ASD and is now able to bring the parent perspective to her work as well. She has three amazing children, two with IEP's, and they help guide the work that she is privileged to engage in. Dr. Farrell completed her Doctoral degree in 2023 with her dissertation research examining the roles of behavior analysts in clinical and school settings. Through her University work she has had several recent publications in books and peer-reviewed journal articles on topics such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), intersectionality, hip-hop pedagogy, and addressing diversity and bias through reflective practices.

Description: Effective support for autistic students requires seamless collaboration between schools and community-based services, yet systemic barriers often prevent meaningful coordination. This session explores strategies to bridge the gap between education and external providers, including behavioral health, early intervention and county-based services.

We will discuss how to navigate barriers—such as legal and policy constraints, funding challenges, and professional resistance—and examine the real-world impact these obstacles have on families. Lack of collaboration can place significant stress on caregivers, affecting their mental health and overall well-being. Attendees will gain insights into how stronger partnerships can ease this burden, improve student outcomes, and create a more inclusive and supportive system.

This session is ideal for educators, school administrators, service providers, and advocates looking to foster meaningful collaboration that benefits both students and families.

2:00-2:30 Breakout session 4: Partnering with VRS to Build Capacity in Schools:

Presenters: Heather Kosec, Lauren Srdar, Margie Webb

Bios: **Heather Kosec** is the statewide Youth Services Manager for Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) in Minnesota. She has worked for over two decades to promote independence for youth with disabilities as a high school special education teacher and case manager, work coordinator, and finally serving as a transition program supervisor before moving over to VRS. In her role as Youth Services Manager, Heather collaborates with the Minnesota Department of Education and Department of Human Services to remove barriers for students with disabilities as they transition from school to adult

life and move toward competitive integrated employment. Heather enjoys experiencing Minnesota's many beautiful seasons through camping, hiking, Nordic skiing, mountain biking, and running.

Lauren Srdar is the West Metro Youth Specialist supporting all of Hennepin, and some of Carver County. Lauren's role is to support staff with onboarding, and problem solving in her area. As a specialist, she is also tasked with training new staff on Purchasing Policies and Procedures for Pre-ETS staff, along with building, streamlining, and strengthening partnerships with school districts to improve youth outcomes. She's passionate about supporting students who are involved in juvenile justice, lack housing, and supporting diversity and inclusion across the board. When not working Lauren can be found exploring community events, creating art, or balancing life as a single parent.

Margie Webb, MS, CRC, Customized Employment Specialist for the State of MN, Vocational Rehabilitation Services. I have over 35 years' experience providing employment services to people with disabilities both in the private sector for 17 years and over 18 years within VRS. I worked as a Program Director for a nonprofit Community Rehabilitation Program supervising as well as providing direct services in employment and independent living in southern MN as well as Dakota County. I developed work experience options for students at the Academy for the Blind in Faribault for seven years. I worked as a transition counselor with VRS for 9 years. I spent 2 working on a Pilot Project in Dakota County, Way to Work learning and practicing customized employment assisting individuals earning sub minimum wages obtain community, integrated employment. The last 7 years I have assisted adults and students in transition with significant impacts of disability to obtain competitive, integrated employment. In 2018 I completed certification in Discovery and Systematic Instruction through Marc Gold & Associates with an emphasis on Customized Employment. I have extensive training in the use of Person-Centered practices, Customized Employment, and Charting the Life Course tools. I currently provide ACRE-Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators training in Employment Services with an emphasis on Customized Employment. I participated in the curriculum development of MN Customized Employment model and currently teach, train, and mentor Customized Employment training in MN. I provide Discovery services in my local area and provide consultation statewide facilitating a MN Customized Employment Community of Practice. I participated in a training program through VCU for Discovering ME in 2020 and continue to work on implementing Discovering ME in MN.

Description: Discovering ME! helps students with significant barriers to employment find and maintain employment in careers that align with their strengths and interests. Discovering ME! uses a youth-focused and person-centered transition assessment to build a foundation of work skills and customized work-based learning experiences.

2:30-3:00 Breakout session 5: Customized employment-(DEED)

Title: Customized Employment

Presenters: Heather Kosec, Lauren Srdar, Margie Webb

Bios: see above

Description: An overview of Customized Employment, a process to achieve competitive integrated employment for those with significant impacts of disability.

3:00 PM - 3:30 PM: Resource Fair & Networking

3:30 PM - 4:00 PM: Closing Remarks and raffle