FIRST PERSON: NORTH DAKOTA IS TRANSFORMING LIVES BY RESHAPING ITS POLICIES ON ADDICTION

Statewide initiatives improve behavioral health outcomes, promote recovery

M ore than 22 million people in the United States struggle with the disease of addiction. It destroys lives, families and futures across every social and economic group. Stakeholders in North Dakota have increasingly called for improvements in the state’s behavioral health system, citing unmet treatment needs and insufficient investments in prevention and recovery supports.

These challenges are not unique to North Dakota. As substance abuse takes its toll on families in our state and across the nation, we must explore new approaches to addiction. Addiction is a treatable disease, and there is hope for recovery. Recovery happens at home, in communities and in the workplace (nearly 70 percent of individuals struggling with addiction are employed full time). For too long, people with the disease of addiction have been deprived of medical treatment, empathy and compassion because of shame, stigma and discrimination.

In recent years, North Dakota has made progress in reducing the rates of substance abuse and related consequences. Today, behavioral health and addiction remain a priority as part of our administration’s Five Strategic Initiatives. We approach each initiative with a shared purpose: to Empower People, Improve Lives and Inspire Success.

OUR APPROACH

North Dakota is focused on improving access to behavioral health services and reinventing recovery. Inspired by First Lady Kathryn Burgum’s courageous decision to share her own recovery story, we created the Office of Recovery Reinvented through executive order in 2018 to promote efforts to eliminate the shame and stigma surrounding addiction. The office has a seven-member advisory committee, chaired by the first lady, that is making a difference in the lives of many. Recovery Reinvented, as it is known throughout our state, is the sum of all the impassioned parts working together — an ongoing series of innovative practices and initiatives to eliminate the shame and stigma of addiction.

Through public-private partnerships, we are uniting to find solutions to help people with proven prevention, treatment and recovery approaches.

At the third annual Recovery Reinvented event last November, we were joined by national and state addiction recovery experts and more than 1,200 people, including individuals in recovery and their families, behavioral health and health care providers and administrators, business and community leaders, faith-based organizations, Native American leaders and educators.

In addition, we’ve launched several efforts aimed at promoting recovery and eliminating stigma.

• The Youth Ending Stigma (YES) Challenge, launched in partnership with the first lady, fosters student-led initiatives and projects focused on eliminating social stigma surrounding behavioral health issues, including addiction and mental health conditions.

• The first-ever Peer Support Day at the Capitol brought together behavioral health advocates and care providers, peer-support specialists and recipients, state and local decision-makers, and others to discuss the benefits of peer support and its role in recovery. The state has doubled down on peer support by expanding reimbursement for these services and recognizing the importance of peer-support specialists within the behavioral health workforce.

• The Families Strong program is available for free to our citizens. Developed by the Addiction Policy Forum and Mosaic Group, Families Strong uses a support-group-based model to help families impacted by substance use disorders.

• We launched a workplace recovery initiative that empowers employers and human resource officers to create recovery-friendly workplaces. We provide resources such as the Workplace Cost Calculator, the Shatterproof Addiction Education Program, and the SAMHSA Workplace Toolkit. Believing in the value of Shatterproof’s “Just Five” program, the North Dakota Department of Human Services is bringing this program to our state team members and private businesses.

• We’ve developed the Behavioral Health Strategy, which aims to invest in prevention and early intervention, increase access to community-based treatment and recovery services and supports, and reduce criminal justice involvement for individuals with behavioral health needs. This strategy continues to guide statewide programs and investments, ensuring efforts are effective.

IMPROVING OUTCOMES

North Dakota spent more than $260 million over the past decade on new jails at the city, county and state levels. Many individuals in our corrections system are there because of crimes rooted in addiction. Half of all arrests in our state are alcohol- or drug-related, and 75 percent of those in our prisons have an addiction. Incarceration without rehabilitation is not a cure for addiction.

In 2016, our judicial, legislative and executive branches joined forces to request intensive techni- cal assistance from The Council of State Governments Justice Center, with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts and the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance. The goal: use a data-driven justice reinvestment approach to help the state reduce the corrections population, contain corrections spending, and reinvest a portion of the savings into strategies that can reduce recidivism and increase public safety.

As a result, we implemented Free Through Recovery, a community-based behavioral health program designed to increase access to recovery support services for individuals engaged with the criminal justice system who have a serious behavioral health concern. As a partnership between our department of Human Services and Corrections and Rehabilitation, Free Through Recovery aims to improve health care outcomes and reduce recidivism by delivering high-quality community services linked with effective community supervision.

Since the program’s launch in 2018, more than 2,500 individuals have been referred to participate in this program and receive services; provided by more than 50 agencies offering care coordination and peer support. Providers are reimbursed monthly based on participant outcomes of recovery, housing, employment and criminal justice involvement.

In the first 18 months of the program, more than 60 percent of participants met three of four outcomes every month.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Today, we continue to build on the foundation we’ve set over the past two years — addressing head-on the challenge of building supportive and strong recovery communities at home, at school or in the workplace. We all play a role in creating a culture that enables recovery in North Dakota and our nation.

North Dakota is a special place, a place where everyone can come together to find solutions. When we can empower people by giving them effective tools and resources, we can improve their lives and inspire success for others. Together, we can reinvent recovery.

Doug Burgum has been the governor of North Dakota since December 2016.

SUBMISSIONS WELCOME

This page is designed to be a forum for legislators and constitutional officers. The opinions expressed on this page do not reflect those of The Council of State Governments or the Midwestern Legislative Conference. Responses to any letter or article are welcome, as are pieces written on other topics. For more information, contact Tim Anderson at 630.925.1922 or tandereson@csg.org

by North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum

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