If you happen to see people changing their porch lights to a blue bulb this month, that’s because April is Autism Awareness month and April 2nd is World Autism Awareness Day. The color blue can symbolize a feeling of calm and acceptance in a world that can be very loud and challenging sometimes. Another thing you may see is a puzzle ribbon or other puzzle designed items. The puzzle pattern reflects the complexity of the autism spectrum. The different colors and shapes represent the diversity of the people and families living with the condition. The brightness of the ribbon signals hope — hope that through increased awareness of autism, and through early intervention and access to appropriate services/supports, people with autism will lead full lives able to interact with the world on their own terms.
So, what is Autism? Autism is a developmental disability that affects an individual in many ways. Some of the more noticeable areas that are affected are social skills, communication, and an increase in behavioral challenges. Autism falls under a spectrum of disorders known as Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD. ASD includes autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger’s syndrome. An autistic disorder can be diagnosed as early as 2-years old. Some of the symptoms that may exhibit are:

- not showing interest in new objects either on their own or when introduced to them
- a difficulty with eye contact or not showing interest in others
- the trouble with feelings expressive and receptive (not laughing when something is funny, not crying when something would likely cause pain)
- prefer not to be held or cuddled
- appear to be unaware when people talk to them, but respond to other sounds
- be very interested in people, but not know how to talk, play, or relate to them
- repeat or echo words or phrases said to them, or repeat words or phrases in place of normal language
- not play ‘pretend’ games (for example, not pretend to ‘feed’ a doll)
- repeat actions over and over again
- have trouble adapting when a routine changes
- have unusual reactions to the way things smell, taste, look, feel, or sound
- lose skills they once had (for example, stop saying words they were using)

Autism Spectrum Disorder affects about 1 in 59 children in the United States and is four times more likely in boys than girls.

DD Certifications

Florence N., DSP – Res. Hab., Bismarck
Kathleen F., DSP – Res. Hab., Jamestown
REGION 2 - MINOT

Employment Services
I’ve been working at Gordmans for four months now and I just won my third credit contest! I really enjoy being a cashier. I work hard and like talking with my customers. My boss tells me they love having me there.

Working hard and enjoying where I work has been huge to me and my family. Community Options helped me put in my job application and I couldn’t be more thankful!

Brittany Schaan

REGION 7 - BISMARCK

Employment Services
My success has been staying out of prison longer than a year. I did this by staying away from old using friends and just keeping my mind on track of staying on track. This success has helped me to stay good and to be able to get back on my feet. I’m also building a stronger relationship my family.

Community Options has helped me by giving me the tools to help me pay bills and to look for work rather than going back to my old ways.

D.C.
On March 13th, our Region 4 team attended a Job Tour at Retrax, a local manufacturing facility that makes truck bed covers. Retrax was started up in 1996 by a man from his garage. They design, develop, and produce truck bed liners and accessories and they are now international.

In Grand Forks they have over 200 employees and are listed as a second chance employer. You don’t necessarily need a high school diploma. The starting wage is around $13 an hour and the positions are full time and offer benefits.

To attract and retain employees, Retrax provides a very transparent wage structure. For every 3 months that an employee works, they receive a 30 cent raise. To retain their employees who seek further advancement, they offer a dollar raise when an employee learns a new job on the line. Our tour guide proudly stated that 99% of promotions are from within.

Retrax competitive employment strategies has given them a solid reputation within the community. Subsequently, Retrax employees held superior tenures compared to other industrial/manufacturing employers in our area. Overall, our team was impressed with the structure, atmosphere, and ethics of Retrax.

Pictured left to right: Zach Bernier, Rochelle Knudson, Katie Barta, Holly Morin, and Cindy Cogsdell.

Becky H., Training Specialist, Bismarck - 7 years
Amelia D., Trainer, Bismarck - 7 years
Zachary B., Staff Development Coordinator, Grand Forks - 5 years
Matthew W., Program Coordinator 1, Bismarck - 5 years
Eric L., DSP, Bismarck - 3 years
Katie B., Employment Specialist, Grand Forks - 3 years
Jennifer W., Program Supervisor, Minot - 3 years
Stacie Ingvalson - DSP, Fargo

Stacie shows excellent communication and picks up extra shifts when needed. She is always going above and isn’t afraid to ask for help or to help out where she can. Stacie follows the policies and has excellent attendance. Stacie is great with customers and is a very hard worker. We appreciate having her here at Community Options!

Lacey Hubert - Director of Services, Fargo

Lacey is willing to do whatever is needed to make her region run smoothly. If needed Lacey will come in early, stay late, work in the evenings or work on weekends to ensure all customers are receiving the services that are requested. Lacey knows the customers in her region very well and does a great job at advocating for them and assisting them with their goals as well as their dreams. Lacey has built a great relationship with other agencies, guardians as well as DDPMs. She does a great job in communicating with teams.

Lacey has been an integral part in her region’s growth and often thinks outside the box to provide the best services possible for a customer. When working direct with customers, Lacey does an amazing job, getting them involved in everything that they’re doing.

Lacey also does a great job ensuring that her staff are trained and comfortable with customer’s plans when working with a customer. Lacey does a great job at showing amazing leadership to her staff!

Jen Schultes - DSP, Jamestown

Every Wednesday Jen brings her customers to the James River Senior Center. She is always positive and encouraging as they fold laundry, clear tables after lunch, clean them and set them back up. Jen is always in control in a positive way, and encourages hygiene and clean working areas. Jen encourages teamwork and is always praising customers which helps them to do a good job.
In March, Cindy Mastel of Bismarck, testified in front of the state’s legislative House Appropriations Committee, and advocated to reinstate raises for all DSPs statewide. Cindy, who has worked at Community Options for 14 years, went to the capital and spoke (on her vacation time!) and did a fantastic job! Cindy was the only DSP that testified from any agency statewide. She spoke of the hard work that DSPs do and said that not receiving a pay increase in nearly three years has really had an effect on morale. Cindy also advocated for changes in the funding system which has increased the work load, saying its another reason why raises should be reinstated.

Thank you, Cindy, for taking the time to testify and thank you for advocating for all us! Your hard work and dedication is appreciated more than we can say!

Please read Cindy’s testimony on the following page.
My name is Cindy Mastel. I have worked as a Direct Support Professional in the field of Developmental Disabilities for the past 13 years. I very much enjoy working with my customers and helping them achieve the goals that they have set for themselves. I believe I have been a positive influence in their lives and I have often heard from the families of my customers about how appreciative they are for the care that I provide for their loved ones. It is truly a humbling experience to be the recipient of such praises and compliments. I also work with several co-workers who are also dedicated to working with and helping their customers. We were all attracted to this field because of our passion to help those who may be struggling physically, emotionally, mentally, or intellectually. We love people and we have a desire to help them.

As much as I enjoy my job, it does not come without its challenges. The burnout rate for people working in the area of human services is very high. Working with a vulnerable population, such as those with Developmental Disabilities, can make it even more challenging at times. The work that we do is mentally and emotionally draining. But, we return day after day because we wonder who would care for the customers that we love if we weren’t there. So, we press on.

The demands of our job have always been high. But, they have increased exponentially since April 1, 2018 with the start of a new DD Payment system which reduced reimbursement for community based programs. This directly affected my job. Because of this change, my co-workers and I must now support more individuals at a time, which represents a greater risk for our customers and a greater liability to us as employees. The amount of documentation that is required has also increased and we struggle balancing taking care of our customers and finishing the required documentation. It is often a delicate balance. We struggle with what is more important. Sometimes we get frustrated with having to make those choices.

We knew going into this job the demands that would be placed on us. We made the choice to move into this job anyway because of the love for our customers. We would invite you to come observe us for a day and immerse yourself in the experience of what we do. Then we would ask you to decide to reimburse us fairly for the work that we do. We did not go into this job for the money. But, I ask that you would show us the honor and respect that we deserve by approving a pay increase for Direct Support Professionals, which we have not seen in three years. I wonder what we would be worth to you if we were taking care of your loved one with a disability.

I thank you for your time today and would ask for your thoughtful consideration in compensating us appropriately for this most rewarding but challenging job.

Sincerely,
Cindy Mastel
Direct Support Professional
Question#1 – Who is eligible to have an HSA* account?

Answer – If you currently have a Blue Cross Blue Shield high deductible health care plan through Community Options and are not enrolled in any other plans that are not high deductible plans, you are eligible. The company will match your contribution each month to a maximum amount depending on the plan you are enrolled in. The maximum amounts per month of matching company contributions are as follows:

- Employee only plan = $50 matching contribution
- Employee + Dependents plan = $75 matching contribution
- Family or Employee + Spouse plans = $100 matching contribution

The company match is like getting 100% interest on your money!

Question#2 – I am not sure what the purpose of an HSA is. Can you help answer that?

Answer – True medical purpose savings! A Health Savings Account (HSA) is different from a Flexible Spending Account (FSA) in that the money put into the account is there until you use it, whether it is money you put in or the company puts in. You do not have to use it in the current year or lose it. Any contribution you put into your HSA account is taken out before it is taxed, thus saving you money by not paying tax on that amount of your paycheck. That is savings number one. The other real savings is that the company matches your contribution up to a certain amount, which is 100% interest on your money you put in the account up to the limit of company matched funds. If you are not currently participating and you qualify and are interested in signing up, contact the HR department or Josh at First Community Credit Union at 701-355-4581 ext. 6209.

Question#3 – What is the difference between paper statements and on-line statements?

Answer – They are basically the same. The biggest difference is with FCCU, you must pay $15 per year for paper statements, but the on-line statements are free. If you are unsure what you currently have, just call FCCU for help.

Question#4 – I forget, but what expenses can my HSA* pay for?

Answer – Your HSA* can only pay for eligible medical expenses which are too numerous to mention in the newsletter. For a complete list of HSA* Eligible Medical Expenses, go online to www.IRS.gov for a complete list. MAKE SURE YOU KEEP ALL OF YOUR RECEIPTS WITH YOUR YEAR END TAX INFORMATION, AS THIS WOULD BE CHECKED IF YOU ARE AUDITED BY THE IRS ON YOUR TAX RETURN.

* You must meet all of the eligibility rules of an HSA* account. Check with HR for any questions regarding HSA* eligibility rules. For a complete list of eligible expenses, go online to the www.IRS.gov website for any specific questions. If you have a question you would like to ask HR submit it to BradW@coresinc.org.