



BEING THERE



SIMEON

LSS Residential Services for Children and Youth

provides comprehensive therapeutic treatment and specialized education to youth ages 10 to 17. These programs focus on helping youth who have emotional, behavioral and educational challenges become successful in their home and community.

Programs are located in:

SPEARFISH

Canyon Hills Center

SIOUX FALLS

Summit Oaks Center

FROM ADVERSITY TO ACHIEVEMENT:

SIMEON'S TRANSFORMATION

Simeon slept through most of his freshman year of high school. His battle with anxiety and depression reached a crisis point that made even the most basic tasks feel insurmountable. At times, he slept more than sixteen hours a day. When he was awake, he spent all of his time absorbed in video games—rarely leaving his bedroom and fighting with his mom when she tried to help.

Simeon's anxiety worsened whenever he stepped foot in school. Social situations were particularly stressful, and he often lashed out at his teachers and counselors when he felt frustrated. A typical class environment didn't work for Simeon, so he eventually refused to attend school altogether, passing only two classes his freshman year because he fell so far behind.

Despite his mom's best efforts, the situation spiraled out of control. Simeon's mom sought professional support and enrolling him at LSS Residential Services for Children and Youth.

"I remember my first meeting with him—he wouldn't come out of the corner," recalled Summit Oaks Center Associate Director Molly Lemke. "He was screaming and yelling at us from his room for most of that day, which was interesting because he ended up being a really nice and polite kid."

Molly and Director Kim Wagley meet many young people like Simeon through their work. They say it's common for kids with anxiety or depression to pull away from their families, hole up in their rooms, and use video games, social media and other distractions to isolate themselves. However, when these same kids get acquainted, they find it surprisingly easy to connect.

"Being in a small group with the same people gave me a lot more confidence," explained Simeon. "Everyone was really helpful toward each other."

Slowly, Simeon grew accustomed to his new environment. "It was scary to adjust, but exciting. The days felt slower and we had a good routine. Routine is huge for me."



together

we can create stronger,
more empowered families

As I reflect on the diverse stories emerging from our work, a common thread of resilience, empowerment and community stands out. Whether it's the journey of a young person overcoming personal challenges, a family reclaiming their dream of homeownership, or our collective effort to strengthen families across the state, these stories illustrate the profound impact of our work.

We see firsthand how supportive interactions can turn challenges into achievements and how even the smallest actions can lead to significant transformations. The impact of our work extends beyond individuals and families we serve. Incrementally we are helping to advance our vision that all South Dakotans are healthy, safe and accepted.

We remain committed to making a meaningful difference in the lives of those we serve. Thank you for being an integral part of this journey. Together, we are creating a stronger community.

A MESSAGE FROM OUR PRESIDENT/CEO

Rebecca Kiesow-Knudsen

— Simeon's Transformation cont'd

While the transition took time, Simeon found comfort in the daily regimens—breakfast, class, gym and group. “Group was enlightening,” he said. “It taught me how to cope with stress and anxiety, and taught me life skills.”

Simeon remembers gym time being particularly beneficial. “I had barely thrown a ball in my life, but the other kids were helpful and even gave me tips on how to do it.”

Gym time was just one small step in a series of breakthroughs. “When he started working with our maintenance person, he just blasted into his own self,” said Kim.

According to Simeon, the leaders and staff never shut down a learning opportunity. That is precisely how he had the opportunity to learn new skills alongside the maintenance person, who welcomed Simeon’s help on repairs.

“At first I didn’t feel like I was helping,” Simeon remembered, “but doing it every week became rewarding. It made me feel accomplished.”

The experience was a turning point, providing Simeon with purpose and having a profound effect on his self-esteem. It was around this time that he also made remarkable improvements at school. Not only did he start passing his classes, he found the motivation to catch up on all the work he missed during his freshman year. “I had a lot more confidence.” Over the course of one summer, he earned back 12 credits.

“He’s made significant progress in regard to his social skills, his academic performance, and being able to express himself,” said Molly.

After spending the afternoon catching up on schoolwork, Simeon asked his social studies teacher if he wanted to play chess. They continued playing regularly. What began as a casual game became one of his most impactful experiences.

“We talked about life, and it gave me a nice break from school,” explained Simeon. “It was a source of calmness and relief for me.”

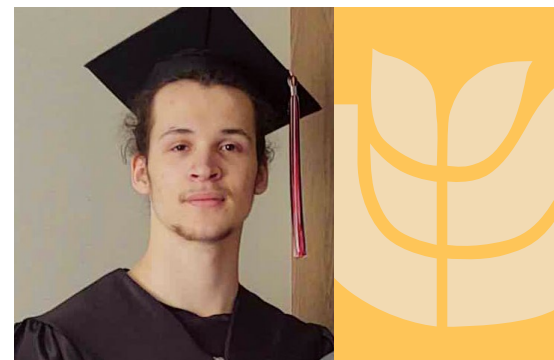
Simeon’s conversations with his teacher and other staff members led him to think further about his future. After graduating

high school, he decided to attend college. Simeon applied for several scholarships, and his essay was reviewed by the Horatio Alger Scholarship Board. His story of resilience struck a chord with the reviewers, and they selected him as one of only 105 national scholarship recipients.

In addition, Simeon received a generous academic scholarship from the University of South Dakota.

“I have a constant desire to learn,” he said.

“Leaving residential care is a big accomplishment,” said Kim. “and they’re going to hopefully have more big accomplishments along the way. It’s a journey.”





FINDING A FOREVER HOME AFTER FINANCIAL LOSS



The home buying process is full of emotion, from excitement to stress, from falling in love with a home to second-guessing it entirely. However, the gravity of this decision is even more profound for families like Shanna's, who aren't just seeking a house—they're aiming to reestablish a home they once lost.

During the peak of the 2008 recession, Shanna and her husband were forced to declare bankruptcy. They had endured a marital separation, accumulated significant debt from their rental property, and struggled to turn a profit on their real estate investments. In the end, they lost both their investment properties and their family home.

"We had our family intact. Nothing else really mattered," said Shanna. "We found a place to raise our family and we'd been perfectly content renting up until these last few years."

Once the kids were on their own, Shanna and her husband began to yearn for a place to call their own. They saved diligently before embarking on the journey of homeownership.

"My husband is 55, and I'm 52. At this point in our lives, we feel a sense of urgency. The housing market isn't favorable for buyers, interest rates are high, and we don't have 30 years to pay down a mortgage. It's much harder now, and we're essentially starting over."

The couple met with a bank to work out a plan and finalize their financing. Since it had been 15 years, Shanna and her husband qualified as first-time homebuyers, which required them to complete a Homebuyer Education class offered through the LSS Center for Financial Resources.

"Since we'd purchased a home before, I wouldn't have even thought about attending."

The first thing Shanna and her husband noticed was how approachable the class felt. Laura, the class facilitator, carried an ease that made the process feel straightforward.

"It was common sense and easy to follow, and she explained things clearly," said Shanna.

The class covered topics ranging from credit history to home inspections to navigating the offer process. "It also gave us a better

perspective on the closing process and what to look for in the paperwork. It felt empowering."

Shanna didn't anticipate the flood of emotions that resurfaced the day they made the offer on the home, she explained. "There was a level of fear about entering a long-term financial commitment, especially knowing that many circumstances beyond our control could change everything. I had to be certain this was the right decision. Walking through those emotions is part of the redemptive full circle."

That redemptive circle, as it happened, was made complete with a half dozen flower beds.

"There was something I don't think I ever said out loud. It was tucked away in the corners of my mind, but I imagined how wonderful it would be to find a house with a perennial garden where someone had poured their love. A garden where I could pick up where she left off. And that's exactly what happened."

**"OUR HOME,
OUR SHELTER,
OUR FAMILY,
—IT'S MORE
THAN A
HOUSE"**



COMMUNITY UNITES TO CELEBRATE DIVERSITY

On June 8th, thousands of people gathered from across the region to celebrate the 27th annual Festival of Cultures. This is the second time offering this event since the integration of the Multi-Cultural Center into LSS. The Festival of Cultures has a long-standing presence in the Sioux Falls community and aims to create a common space for all to gather, learn, and celebrate diverse cultures in the state.

While some Festival attendees pulled up a chair close to the stage to enjoy the day's lineup of captivating performances, others explored the Global Village, made rain sticks in the children's activities tent hosted by SDPB, admired the display of nearly 200 flags representing countries around the globe or tasted something new from local food trucks and other food vendors.

The event's success was made possible because of the partnership with Levitt Sioux Falls, presenting sponsor First PREMIER Bank/PREMIER Bankcard, SDPB, and WIC-CIAO. To learn more and to see pictures from the day, visit Festival.LssSD.org.





STRENGTHENING FAMILIES STARTS WITH A MEAL & GOOD CONVERSATION

A pilot program called Strengthening Families is quietly making waves at LSS—one meal, one session, and one family at a time.

Launched in November 2023, this evidence-based initiative was developed through a partnership between LSS and the South

Dakota Department of Corrections. Its goal is to strengthen family bonds and build resilience through a structured, 11-week curriculum.

While the concept might sound complicated, it's really a shared experience that begins around a dinner table.

The program's unique approach starts with a shared meal each week for all participating families. This isn't just about filling hungry stomachs after a long day, it's a strategic move to ease tensions, build connections, and create a relaxed environment where genuine interactions can happen. In these moments, the formality slowly

fades, replaced with good conversations and laughter, all the while friendships are developing among families.

After the meal, families break into separate sessions—parents in one group and youth in another. Each group follows a common theme tailored to their perspective. "We start with the basics of communication and how to develop that relationship in your family," explains Amy Witt, LSS Chief Program Officer. "Then we move on to problem-solving skills, handling tough conversations, and managing at-risk behaviors. Each session builds on the last, helping families develop their relationships and navigate challenges together."

Then, families come back together to practice their new skills together. These interactive family activities reinforce the lessons learned and put communication and problem-solving strategies into practical experiences.

The program's strength comes from the curriculum, but the

momentum and energy come from the community it builds. Families, who initially might feel isolated, begin to form supportive networks.

"When you have kids who are struggling, it's easy to feel isolated as a parent because you are expected to have all the answers," says Witt. "We give families practical skills to implement at home when things aren't going as planned. Over time, families begin to feel more in control. They feel like they can do something in a situation where they maybe didn't feel like they could before."

The program's impact extends beyond the immediate participants. The skills learned often have a ripple effect, positively influencing siblings, friendships, and the broader family dynamic.

Thanks to support from the South Dakota Department of Corrections along with additional funding sources, Strengthening Families is offered at no cost to participants. There are no prerequisites making it accessible for families.



"A teen boy said,
**'I actually talk to
my mom now.'**
Sounds basic, but it's
a profound shift. That's
what it's all about."

Jill Jensen
Senior Director, Permanency
Services and Facilitator



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NATIONAL COLLABORATIONS IMPACT SOUTH DAKOTA FAMILIES

LSS of South Dakota engages in various cohorts at both regional and national levels. Many of these cohorts fall under the umbrella of Lutheran Services in America, LSA, a network comprising 300 health and human service agencies in 1,400 communities across the nation.

Amy Witt, the Chief Program Officer at LSS, emphasizes the value of involvement with LSA, and the connections made with national partners. "Through LSA and other national and local partners, we gain access to significant resources and best practices providing a broader perspective on our work," says Witt. "And for us, it really has focused on ensuring that youth and families are living in safe, stable homes which aligns with our strategic vision."

Participation allows LSS to learn about new methods, research and strategies that have proven successful in other areas of the country. It provides opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations about how we might improve outcomes for families and communities in our state. Then follow up with data and outcome measurements to ensure we are empowering families and addressing disparities.

Keeping Families Together at Home

LSS is active in the national **FAMILY STABILIZATION INITIATIVE** which works to empower families to stay together. This has given rise to a cohort spanning four states that focuses on preventative programming that keeps kids who are at risk of child welfare or juvenile justice involvement with their families and in their home. LSS Family Stabilization Services, also known as CARES Wraparound, was created in 2021 as a result of these conversations.

"These are families who would otherwise fall through the cracks. They aren't being neglectful in the home, but they are really struggling," says Witt.

Results-Based Strategy

LSS advocates for and benefits children and youth at a higher level through the **RESULTS NETWORK** (part of the LSA Results Innovation Lab) which focuses on addressing racial disparities in child welfare and includes 17 agencies in 12 states. Witt's leadership and experience in children and family services positioned her as peer leader guiding teams in their work.

The cohorts follow a Results-Based Leadership format. Amy reflects, "It's about doing the work better and using tools provided including access to national consultants to challenge us and move the work forward."

The engagement has impacted LSS's external initiatives as well as played a significant role in leadership development. "The tools and skills acquired through the cohort are utilized in leadership training, benefiting both internal teams and the families we work with," continues Witt.

In addition, LSS is active in the **RURAL AGING ACTION NETWORK**, focusing on addressing gaps in care in rural America. As a result, LSS launched Older Adults Rural Network (OARN), a pilot program in Douglas and Charles Mix Counties and now expanding to Bon Homme and Hutchinson counties. The program helps identify resources for people ages 55 and older who may need help with transportation, food security, reducing social isolation, healthcare navigation/referrals, and safe housing.