



HOPE Consortium's 9th Annual Conference Brings Knowledge, Connection, and Hope to Rural Communities



The HOPE Consortium hosted its 9th Annual Virtual Conference on August 7–8, 2025, bringing professionals, community leaders, and partners together to strengthen efforts around substance use prevention, treatment, recovery, and risk reduction in rural Wisconsin and beyond. With more than 30 sessions across five tracks—including Ethics & Boundaries, Professional Skills & Development, Specific Substances, Community Engagement, and Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome—the conference offered attendees practical tools, insights from lived-experience, and evidence-based strategies tailored to the realities of rural communities.

The event opened with Dr. Alonzo Kelly, a three-time bestselling author, whose keynote *Navigating the Terrain of Change* energized participants with humor, candor, and actionable communication strategies. Attendees praised his ability to deliver practical communication tools that could be applied both professionally and personally. Among the most attended breakout sessions was the Ethics & Boundaries training, which many participants described as the best version they had experienced in years. This session not only met continuing education requirements for substance use professionals, but also offered meaningful, real-world examples that participants said they would take back to their work.

Other keynote highlights included Andrew “AJ” Schreier, who closed the conference with *How We Speak Matters*, a powerful session challenging participants to reflect on the role of language in reducing stigma, and Jacob Jansen and Douglas Darby, two men in long-term recovery, who shared their *T.R.U.T.H.* model (Teaching Resilience Using Trust & Honesty). Their heartfelt

storytelling deeply moved attendees and reminded participants of the strength that comes from resilience and authenticity. Breakout sessions covered a wide range of critical topics, from cannabis-induced psychosis to SMART Recovery tools for peer support, public health vending machines, and considerations for working with special rural populations. Attendees appreciated both the wide breadth of offerings and the practical resources they could bring back to their organizations.

The conference drew 195 participants from 9 states and 40 of 72 Wisconsin Counties, with representation across treatment and recovery services, human services, criminal justice, public health, and tribal and community organizations. Evaluation results show resounding satisfaction: 100% of 156 conference evaluation respondents reported increased knowledge as a result of attending, 99% would recommend HOPE trainings to colleagues, and 99% expressed interest in attending again next year. Participants valued the affordability (\$25 registration fee), virtual accessibility, and the opportunity to earn CEUs while engaging with high-quality speakers. As one attendee noted, *“This is an OUTSTANDING conference. It is affordable, wildly relevant, and full of opportunities to connect and learn. I’ve been attending for years and always come away with new tools.”*

As the HOPE Consortium continues its mission of collaborative, community-based approaches to substance use challenges, this year’s conference underscored the power of connection, compassion, and innovation. From thought-provoking keynotes to practical breakout sessions, the 2025 conference reinforced HOPE’s vision: stronger rural communities, healthier individuals, and a future where recovery is possible for all. Planning is already underway for the 10th Annual HOPE Consortium Conference in 2026, where attendees will once again gather to learn, connect, and share in building a healthier Wisconsin.

Since its formation in 2015, the HOPE Consortium has been a collaborative network of dedicated partners working together to address substance use challenges in rural Wisconsin. Originally established through state HOPE legislation to respond to the opioid crisis in the Northern region, the Consortium expanded in 2017 to include methamphetamine response efforts, and in 2020 and 2023, welcomed the addition of Central and Western regions. The HOPE Consortium is facilitated by Family Health Center of Marshfield, Inc. (FHC) and is funded in part by Roots & Wings Foundation.