

Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (DIDD)
Direct Support Workforce Advisory Report
2022-2023
Direct Support Professional (DSP) Workforce Advisory Group

In recent times, discussions have been had by the Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (DIDD) and other State of Tennessee groups, referencing the current and future workforce situation, and explicitly addressing the Direct Support Professional (DSP) role. After meeting with several key stakeholder groups, it was determined that DIDD and others needed to hear the current voice of DSPs throughout Tennessee. There was a proposal to begin workforce advisory groups in all three of Tennessee's grand regions.

This proposal was presented to the DIDD Programs Operations Unit under the Workforce Development Program with the understanding that funding will be needed to implement this project. The hope is that this work will elevate the status and value of DSPs by discussing current and ideal work environments, promoting best practices, and providing necessary knowledge and skills all within DIDD and the State of Tennessee. The proposal was approved, and the DSP Workforce Advisory Group initiative was formed.

DIDD 1915c provider agencies were approached to participate in this project voluntarily. Those interested submitted applications for DSPs within their agencies who they felt would be excellent advisory board members based on their work performance and abilities. The agencies and the DSPs selected committed to getting a better understanding of and educating everyone on the valued role of the DSP, what creates a good work environment, and becoming subject matter experts (SMEs) on the work in this field. The DSP representatives agreed to participate in all discussions and subsequent activities to achieve the desired outcomes. The DSP Workforce Advisory Groups formed were comprised of regional DSPs placing a selection emphasis on the following:

- Culturally diverse, including diversity in age
- Focus on male staff due to a predominantly female workforce
- Comprised of a mixture of short and longer-tenured staff with 1, 5, 10, and 15-plus years in the field

There was a DSP Workforce Advisory Group set up in each region of the state. The groups began meeting in July of 2022 and would run through July of 2023. The initial focus of these workgroups was to define the role of the DSP, discuss its history, and listen to DSPs explain, in their own words, what they felt the DSP's role to be.

Below is a summary of the four major areas the workgroups identified as critical to advancing the role of the DSP workforce statewide as they move forward with their work.

- Acknowledging the rewards of being a DSP
- Addressing the challenges of being a DSP
- Effective ways to enhance the role of a DSP
- Effective and achievable measures to improve job requirements

From these areas identified, the primary goal of these workgroups was to develop recommendations and strategies to produce outcomes that could be measurable for the provider agencies to benefit and grow the role of DSPs. These will, hopefully, enhance the lives of the DSPs and those with disabilities receiving services throughout Tennessee.

There are a few items to note about the preliminary outcomes discussed. These broad outcomes will encompass various items applicable at the provider, DIDD, DSP workforce, statewide, and national levels while recognizing that cost and implementation that can be factored into the outcome achievement. This document is intended to facilitate a conversation among these groups about the process for assessing the landscape within themselves and the State. The workgroups considered current state funding limitations, staffing limitations, and the overall knowledge of DSPs known by outside stakeholders.

From work throughout 2022 and 2023, three significant areas of focus for potential strategies were determined.

- There should be a focus on tools and strategies for agencies to create a better work environment for the DSP and the person supported. This will focus on strategies to understand better the DSP roles within an agency and better support situations for the people receiving support.

- There should be a focus on the creation of a mentoring program for providers to use for all staff. In turn, the hope is that this program will assist with the team's growth, thus improving the life of the person receiving support and the staff who assist with this support.
- There should be a focus on tools and strategies to advocate for DSPs, looking at business choices vs. person's preferences and DSP accountability.

DSP DATA REFERENCE:

Based on information and data from the 2021 National Core Indicators (NCI) Staff Stability Survey (in which Tennessee DIDD 1915c providers participate), they reflected the following on DSPs Employment nationwide.

Tenure (Length of Employment) of DSPs

Of the DSPs employed by respondents as of Dec. 31, 2021, one-third (33.1%) had only been employed there for a year or less. Of the DSPs who left employment at responding agencies in 2021, slightly less than one-half (47.2%) had been employed there for less than one year.

Of the DSPs employed by respondents as of Dec. 31, 2021:

- 18.0% had been employed for less than six months
- 15.1% had been employed between 6 and 12 months
- 15.5% had been employed between 12 and 24 months
- 11.7% had been employed between 24 and 36 months
- 39.6% had been employed 36 months or more

Of the DSPs who left (separated from) employment between Jan. 1, 2021, and Dec. 31, 2021:

- 34.9% had been employed for less than six months
- 21.1% had been employed between 6 and 12 months
- 16.7% had been employed between 12 and 24 months
- 9.3% had been employed between 24 and 36 months
- 18.0% had been employed 36 months or more

Across states, the DSP turnover ratio in 2021 ranged from 28.5% to 87.5%; the average turnover ratio was 43.2%. This shows a pattern of employees leaving the role at higher numbers than in past years. While many separations can be monetarily related due to low wages in this field, strategies must be created to ensure employee satisfaction that can be immediately addressed (while employee rates are being addressed statewide and nationally). DSPs should work in good placements to ensure enjoyment in their job. Their role must be recognized for its value and worth. The DSP's voice should count as one of the most valuable inputs on service satisfaction for people with disabilities, and DSP growth should be presented for those who desire this and display the recognizable talents to support their personal growth.

Strategy One: Better Match up between DSPs and People Supported

There should be a focus on tools and strategies for agencies to create a better work environment for the DSP and the person supported. This will focus on strategies to understand better the DSP roles within an agency and better support situations for the people receiving support.

Recommended Outcomes:

To create a more person-centered workplace for DSPs based on their likes, dislikes, strengths, and overall satisfaction, the following strategies could be implemented:

- ✓ Creation of a person-supported match tool which defines the likes, dislikes, preferences, must-haves, interests, staff gender preference, physical abilities levels, religious views, if applicable, and overall crucial components for the person supported to have the quality of life they desire. This tool must be a working document and updated as significant changes occur in their life. Things such as employment, health issues, family changes, home changes, and substantial overall events could cause a person to change.
- ✓ Input from the person supported should be used to create this and not just based on the Person-Centered Support Plan (PCSP) and knowledge provided by family. If the person supported does not wish to participate in the process or has limited verbal skills, then learning can be derived from knowledgeable staff, family, and the person's support coordinator.

- ✓ When interviewing potential new DSPs or DSPs desiring to work in other work areas, questions aimed at determining likes, dislikes, strengths, and overall satisfaction, as mentioned above, should be asked. For instance, what does the DSP think would be a good workday for them, and what do they enjoy (music, events, physical activities, and overall general interests)? Are they a morning person or an evening person? Do they enjoy being on the go all the time or need breaks in between? Can they cook? If not, are they interested in learning? While maybe not comfortable with total care, do they feel they could do it, if necessary (DIDD is working with an aging population), and questions that may be agency specific about the services this agency provides.
- ✓ Once a potential DSP has been determined, the provider needs to have a means of introduction of the potential DSP to the person supported. While the provider always needs to be mindful of ensuring the person supported that this potential DSP may be coming to their home to work, there is always the potential of the match not working after the potential DSP and the person supported meets.
- ✓ If a match does not work, then the provider needs to have a plan for the next steps for the potential DSP. It may be that the DSP is matched up to another potential person-supported, the DSP is asked about other shifts or the option of being as-needed staff if no permanent home site is available.

Potential Benefits Strategy One:

- ✓ Using this process could ensure a better match of personalities between the person providing and the person receiving services.
- ✓ Doing this curbs the potential opportunities for failures and disappointments in a work environment, thus enhancing the DSP's role and ensuring compatibility with the person supported.
- ✓ While it is noted that not all areas will be compatible due to the program's logistics, as many as possible that can be matched will ensure a better working environment.

- ✓ While using a match-up tool ensures a better DSP-to-person match, it should be noted that the Advisory Workgroup pointed out that people's tastes and preferences could change throughout their lives as exposure to new things and environments is presented. People move, start jobs, skills change, and overall lifestyles change. It is recommended that the tool be reviewed at a minimum annually for any revisions that may need to occur, if not needed sooner.

Strategy Two: Mentoring Program

There should be a focus on DSPs who have now chosen to work in the field to be provided practical and timely training to perform their roles successfully and give needed support to develop and grow within this role.

Recommended Outcomes of the Program:

To create a more stable workforce with a focus on retention and success of the DSP by acknowledging that training, whether facilitated in person or computer-based, is not sufficient for the new DSP or any employee who has the desire or need for growth and development. Acknowledging this and providing other opportunities for training should result in DSPs' satisfaction with their role, strengthen them to better support and advocate for people supported, and offer cost-saving measures to a provider agency by stabilizing DSPs remaining within their roles.

Creating a mentoring program for all new DSPs within the provider agency and opening the program to any tenured DSP or provider staff who desire this opportunity for growth in their role is needed. The mentor and all program administration staff should be compensated for this valuable role they provide within their provider agency and recognized for their work.

- ✓ This mentoring program should focus on who should be determined to be a mentor and the skills needed by this person to be a successful mentor. The mentor's skill set (personality, work ethic, cultural competence, tenure with the provider, ability to think on their feet, working knowledge of the people supported, and understanding of the role of a DSP) can determine the best DSPs for the mentor role.

- ✓ The mentor can be determined by a questionnaire to the potential mentor on the desire to be part of the program, based on their skill set to offer to the program, what they hope to accomplish by becoming a mentor personally and professionally, how they address opportunities that are not working and ones that are, how they acknowledge others' insights, and how their work grows within the program.
- ✓ The program should only occur after the DSP has completed all required DIDD and agency-specific training and begin no sooner than after two weeks of hands-on work experience in a home.
- ✓ The mentoring program should be flexible in the manner and style of the program. While some meetings, especially in the beginning, need to be in person, having the flexibility of remote meetings should occur to meet the requests and needs of both parties and the cost-effectiveness associated with staff work time. Meeting areas should be private where the mentor and mentee are comfortable reviewing their work.
- ✓ The provider agency should have a Mentoring Program Administrator who oversees the program for all stakeholders. Mentors will report to this person with bi-weekly follow-ups on the mentoring program meetings between mentors and mentees in a manner determined by the Mentoring Program Administrator. Every effort should be made to have a neutral person for the Mentoring Program Administrator role who can consider what is best practice for DSPs and the provider agency and who can provide insight into the mentor's struggles and create work plans with the mentor for the mentee if needed. The Mentoring Program Administrator should be able to decide if a mentor needs to be changed out or no longer participate in the program and provide updates to the provider administrative staff.
- ✓ Actively work toward the mentor/mentee sessions occurring with the minimum suggestion of one hour per week for the first two weeks, then every other week, then every third week for a period of no less than three months (unless the mentor and mentee both agree success has been reached) with the Mentoring Program Administrator providing feedback to the mentors of the program.

- ✓ If concerns develop within this program with the mentee, then these concerns should be brought immediately to the Mentoring Program Administrator to address in the manner the provider agency deems necessary.

Potential Benefits Strategy Two:

- ✓ The program will assist in slowing down the revolving door of DSPs within a supported person's life and within a provider agency by investing in DSPs to maintain their employment and satisfaction with their job.
- ✓ This mentoring program will assist with retaining valuable DSPs and fewer monies spent on the ongoing turnaround cost of new DSPs and expenses associated with an unmet workforce.
- ✓ Creates a more robust workforce within the provider agency for employment needs.
- ✓ Stabilizing DSPs and their roles, thus enabling provider agency supervisors to return to their role and devote the time needed for program oversight instead of hands-on work in the homes due to staff shortages.

Strategy Three: Professional Growth and Acknowledgement of the DSP

There should be a focus on tools and strategies to advocate for DSPs, looking at business choices vs. person's preferences and DSP accountability in the role.

Recommended Outcomes of the Program:

To work toward acknowledging DSPs, who they are, what they do, and what they offer as DSPs to enhance the chosen lifestyles of people supported and advance themselves and their provider agency. The end effect will showcase a performance-driven provider agency by recognizing the people supported and their chosen lifestyles met, the DSPs who support this, and displaying provider growth while maintaining cost-effectiveness with a strong workforce of valued DSPs, people supported, and their families. There is hope that, with this performance program, the DSP will achieve personal growth, monetary gains that truly recognize their work and the extra efforts they are bringing forth.

With a focus on the acknowledgment and value of a DSP, it was noted by members of the DSP Workforce Advisory Group that there should be a Tennessee-defined role of a DSP for DSPs and provider agencies. A measurable tool for DSP work acknowledgment and growth other than standard timeframe employment work evaluations and the DSPs' acknowledgment of their role can advance the IDD field. This will extend the DSP role and increase providers' performance. This will additionally showcase Tennessee's great work and share it with states nationwide.

DSP Working Definition: ***A person with a solid working knowledge of the IDD field who has chosen to be a provider of daily support, an advocate, and a voice for people with IDD to live an informed lifestyle of their choice.***

- ✓ There needs to be a defined tool with a rating scale that involves the creation of a job plan with the DSP's input on what they will work toward and what their employer would like to see the DSP accomplish. This will enable the DSP to have a format to communicate and showcase their work and efforts. This tool will announce the DSP's work, accomplishments, and plans within the provider agency with the desired acknowledgment by their supervisor.
- ✓ It is recommended that the performance tool be reviewed quarterly with the DSP and their direct supervisor. The DSP supervisor should be able to create the tool based on the provider agency's mission as a provider and what the provider desires to see within their valued DSPs. The tool should have an area where the provider displays outcomes they want to see the DSP work toward. Additionally, the DSP should have access to highlight their work and accomplishments each quarter. This is above and beyond the scope of the DSP job description with the provider agency. This tool should highlight those "extras" the DSP has performed that place them at a higher expectation than those of the basic job description. This should underline measurable changes made to improve the quality of life of the person supported and agency change and improvement.
- ✓ There must be a performance rater for all performance tools to determine the rating score.
- ✓ While the start of outcomes can be derived from a DSP job description, the actual outcome should create an environment for measurable change and growth in the DSP's work role and their work with the person supported.

- ✓ It should be recommended that no more than four to five outcomes be created for a calendar year. This document should be made available for the DSP to review continually throughout the year as a reminder of the plan and advancement. The rating scale should be defined in the rating levels.
- ✓ The provider agency should, from the beginning, ensure the expectation of what differentiates an outstanding DSP from a good DSP and provide insight into the DSP role.
- ✓ The Workforce Advisory Group recommended that areas of professionalism must be addressed with DSPs. The Advisory Groups felt that presenting an image and attitude of such is essential to being a valued person in society. A focus should be placed on work timeliness, overall appearance, and work attitude with a team approach and emphasis placed on the day of the person supported, not the convenience of the DSP.

Potential Benefits Strategy Three:

- ✓ The provider agency will become a more robust agency with the true intent of being person-centered by being able to showcase measurable changes in the life of a person supported.
- ✓ While a monetary component will be associated with the performance program, it will be a cost-saving measure as it will allocate monies toward the DSPs who are making a difference other than those who “just check the box”.
- ✓ It will create an environment of “Us” instead of provider versus DSP. When DSPs know they are being heard and recognized, they will continue to strive for higher goals and accomplishments within the provider agency.
- ✓ It will potentially retrain DSPs with low expectations to work toward higher expectations within their position.
- ✓ It will potentially assist provider agencies with helping DSPs understand their role with daily services and documentation of such services. The Workforce Advisory Group felt that DSP communication logs in the home were lacking and should be reinstated.

The 2022/23 Workforce Advisory Group hopes that IDD provider agencies and stakeholders will find value and worth in the strategies created. DSPs created the strategy, taking from their extensive knowledge of the field and desiring overall growth and value in the role of a DSP.

The DSP Workforce Advisory Group created an open forum for DSPs in Tennessee to speak and have their voices heard and their worth acknowledged. While Tennessee has always acknowledged the worth of its DSPs and realized they are the core of the IDD workforce, the opportunity is now here for others to recognize their value. We are nothing without one; that one begins with a DSP and the care and support they provide to some of the most valuable citizens of Tennessee.

We close with the 2022/23 Workforce Advisory Group Mission and Vision Statement.

DSP Workforce Advisory Workgroup Mission statement:

To create and develop strategies to advance the role of the Direct Support Workforce.

DSP Workforce Advisory Workgroup Vision statement:

As valued members of our community DSP workforce advisory group, our vision is to build a solid direct support workforce by evaluating the current workforce and ensuring that all support staff are considered essential to a person's success in living their chosen lifestyles. In contrast, the workforce should remain firm and meet all elements and requirements needed. We will work to elevate the role of direct support workers not only to those in our field but to all citizens of Tennessee, the United States, and the nation.

Special acknowledgment should be given to the 2022/23 DSP Workforce Advisory Group members and the provider agencies represented. None of this would have been possible without their hard work, dedication, and sharing of their dreams.

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Provider Agencies:

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Loving Arms
New Horizons
Pacesetters
Progressive Directions
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