



The Findings and Recommendations in this report are the result of analyses and syntheses of qualitative and quantitative observations made during DSP Experience meetings held in December 2022 and January 2023, sponsored by the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, and designed and facilitated by OADSP and Jacqueline Romer-Sensky.

The DSP Experience: Pride & Commitment

Purpose

The purpose of the Direct Support Professional (DSP) Experience project is to gain valuable feedback and provide essential input to Ohio's Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD) Workforce Crisis Taskforce, with an aim to improve recruitment, retention, and job satisfaction.

Narrative

The DSP Experience begins at recruitment. It includes everything from the “hook” through the orientation process and on to opportunities for engagement, learning, and growth throughout an individual's tenure as a DSP. The Experience is shaped by the cultures and philosophies of employers, as well as state and local leaders.

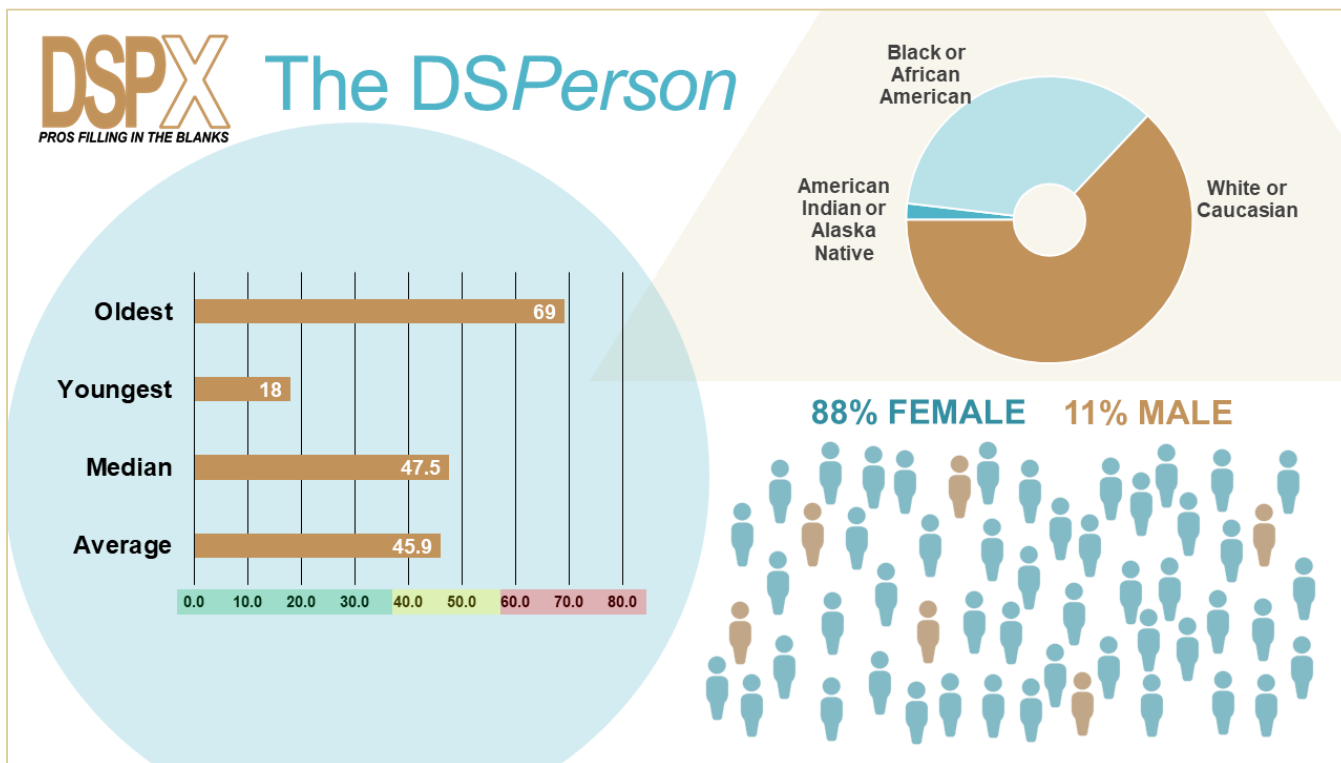
Method & Analysis

This data meets the recommended guidelines for qualitative research as defined by the National Institute on Health (NIH). Qualitative research gathers participants' experiences, perceptions, and behavior. It answers the “hows” and “whys,” instead of how many or how much. Qualitative studies provide a unique opportunity to understand the underlying perceptions and emotions that drive the decisions and behaviors of a group of people. This research targeted a typical case sampling and provided opportunities for face-to-face participation throughout the various regions of Ohio, as well as virtual options; ultimately, data is from a solid sample of DSPs. Additionally, this report recognizes that positive and negative attributes of the system may not be universal, and acknowledges that the experiences of DSPs employed by agency providers and those of Independent Providers may differ in scope and frequency.

Conclusion

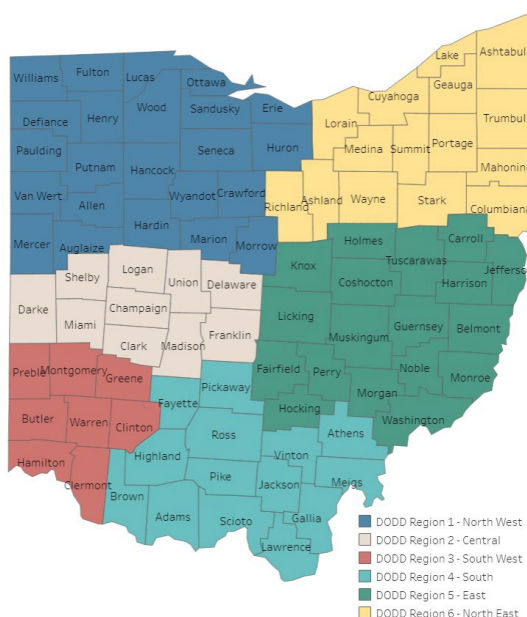
We must remove obstacles, both real and perceived, that require Direct Support Professionals to continuously make significant sacrifices just to maintain their positions, and we have a duty to provide ongoing opportunities for their involvement in addressing critical issues. These efforts will simultaneously improve the DSP experience, raise the public profile of the profession, and exemplify the system's high regard for DSPs and their contributions to the field. In support of those goals, this report concludes with a synopsis and suggested “next steps,” accessible, relevant, and serviceable by any of the various stakeholders in Ohio's I/DD field.

The DSP Experience: Pride & Commitment



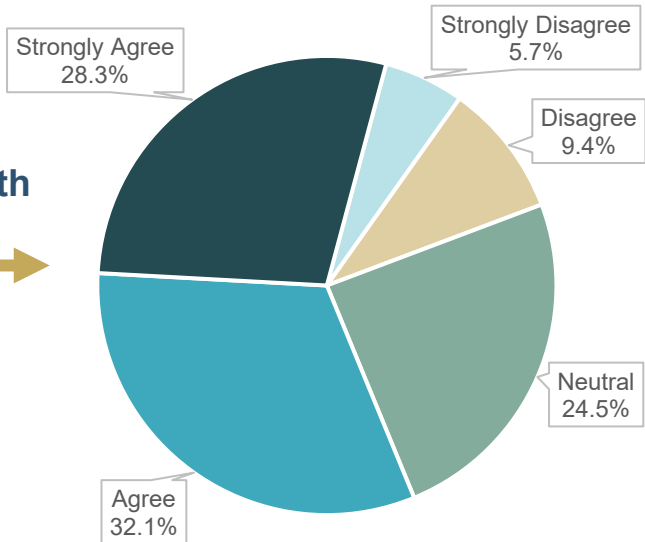
DSP Experience Individual Participant Distribution

Northeast: 14
Northwest: 12
Southwest: 17
East: 11
Central: 13
South: 4

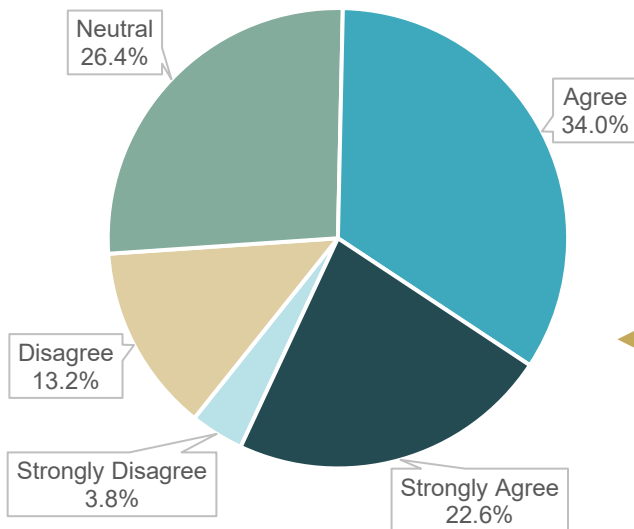


The DSP Experience: Pride & Commitment

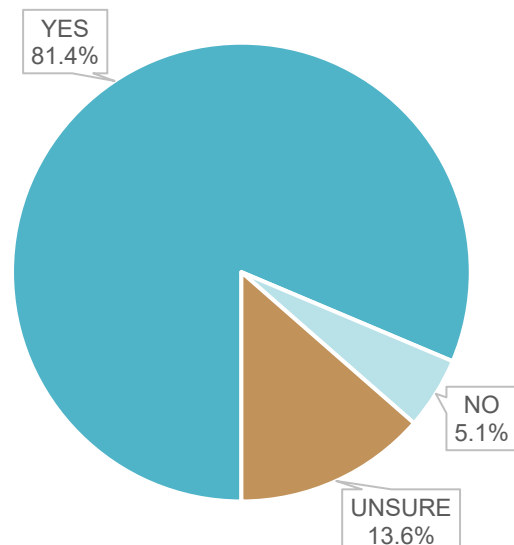
“I feel supported to learn and grow with my organization.”



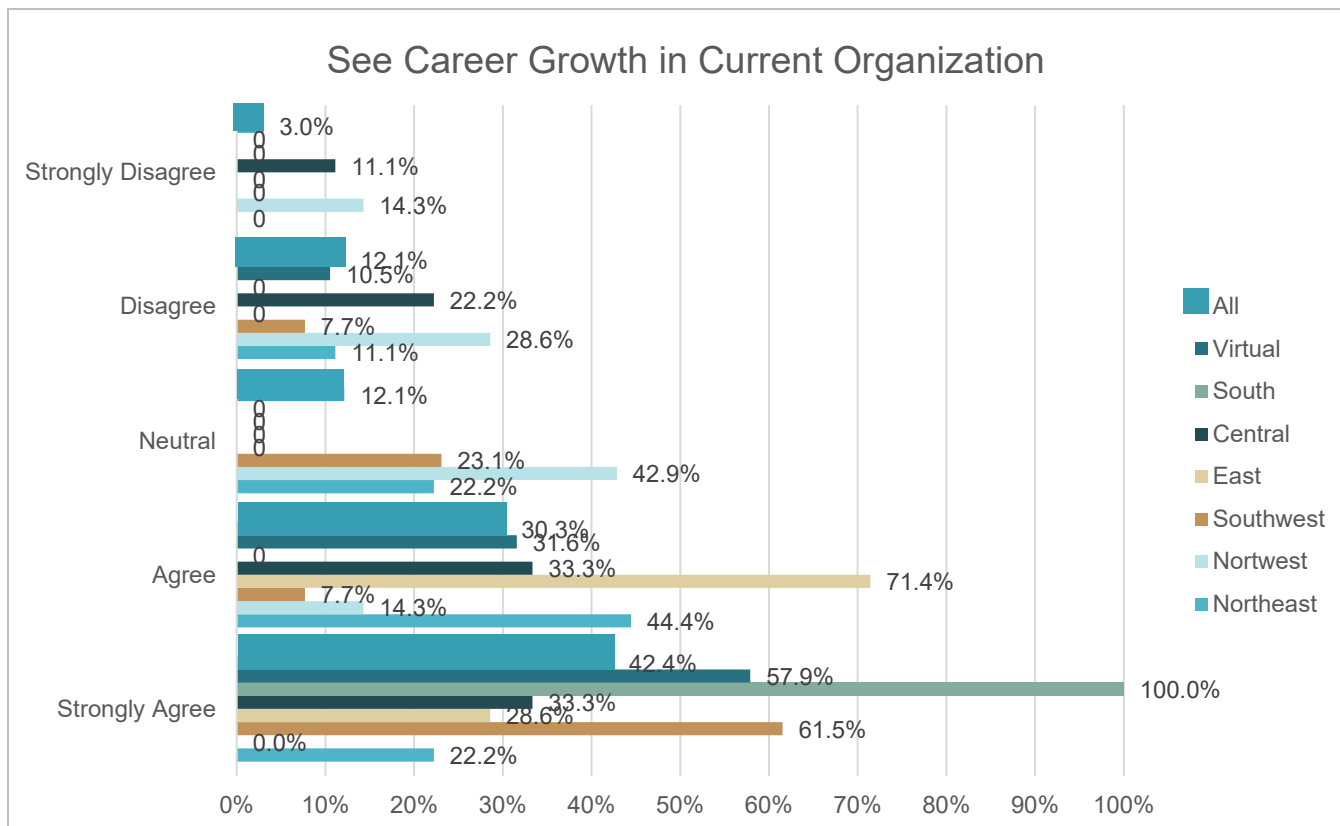
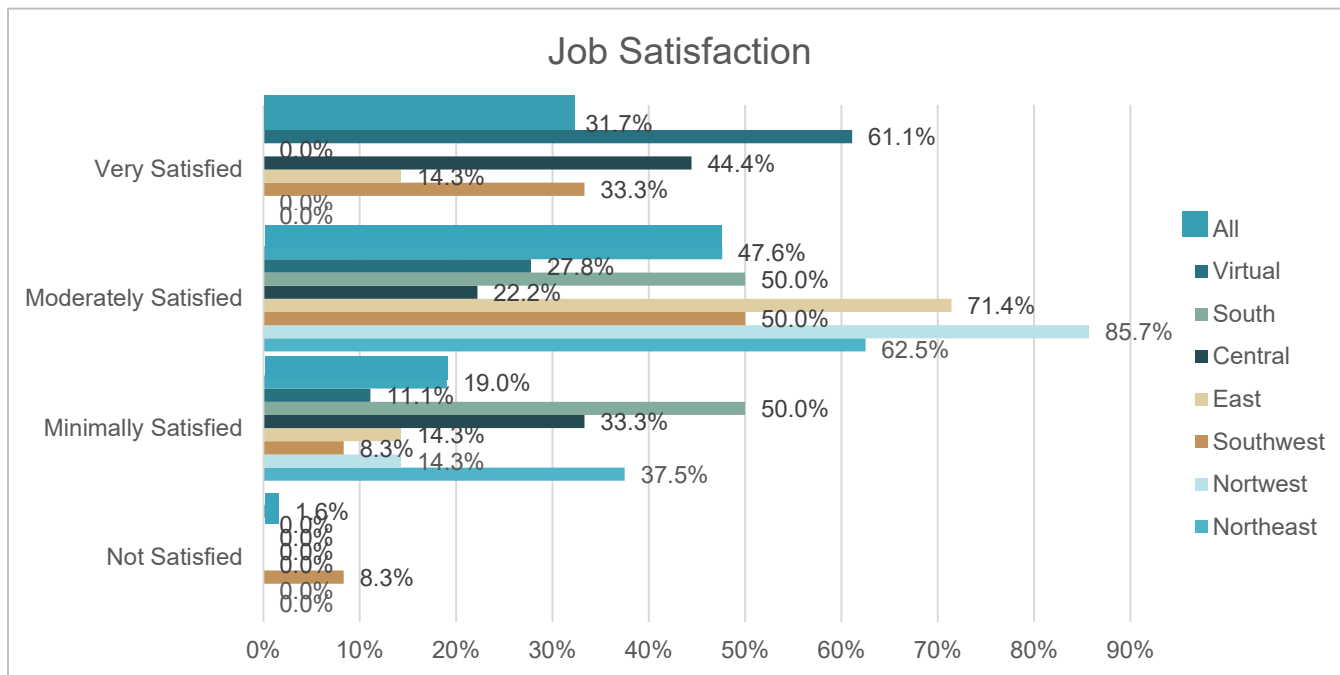
“My organization really inspires the very best in me when it comes to job performance.”



“Would you recommend a career as a DSP to a friend or a relative?”



The DSP Experience: Pride & Commitment



The DSP Experience: Pride & Commitment

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>A) DSPs are proud of their work, find significant and rewarding purpose in their roles, and feel fully valued when their contributions are genuinely recognized.</p> <p>More than anything else, DSPs' concerns are the <u>individuals</u> they support. As such, they maintain their positions, often sacrificing their health and well-being, personal finances, life balance, and family considerations to be of service.</p>	<p>1) Ensure that supervisors are supporting healthy boundaries for hours on the job.</p> <p>2) Increase DSPs' opportunities for recognition, connection, and idea-sharing, at every level – state, region, county, and agency.</p>

“I am proud of the work I do. Our company does a lot to support its employees, and that also helps keep me staying in the field – e.g., holiday potlucks, picnics, appreciation days, awards, giveaways, and events that include our families.”

“Everyone learns differently. You have to wait, listen, watch, and then help teach someone. I love observing and watching, and then puzzling out how best to help.”

“I love that the people we serve are so different or unique – you never know what you’re going to encounter.”

With this field, you know that you truly make a difference. How many people can say that about their jobs?”

“This work is important. It matters.”

The DSP Experience: Pride & Commitment

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>B) DSP compensation is too low for most to consider direct support as a long-term career, and pay is a major obstacle.</p> <p>Recent financial adjustments have been perceived as unfair to longer-term DSPs.</p> <p>DSPs are just as worried about a potential system collapse as any other stakeholder – “will I have a job? Will we have to stop providing services?”</p> <p>Those that do not depend solely on their own income to survive report that they could not maintain their current positions if the financial status of their households changed for the worse, e.g., partners lost their jobs, became unable to work, or took new positions making less money.</p> <p>DSP compensation is also too low to attract qualified candidates with the right “heart” for the position.</p>	<p>3) Champion living wages that keep up with inflation and the cost of living.</p> <p>4) Explore non-conventional benefits and supports for DSPs, e.g., providing access to financial literacy programs and career planning.</p> <p>5) Improve the DSP compensation package with system-wide support and the following inclusions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased starting wage rate • Ongoing training and professional development opportunities at no cost to DSPs • Pay equity and bonuses for – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Longevity ○ “Knowledge capital”/experience ○ Additional work-related certifications and credentials • Restructured Competency-Based Wage Add-On, providing a certified/credentialed career path with commensurate wages • Affordable benefits (medical, dental, vision, etc.) • Establishment of regional and/or statewide network(s) to connect DSPs with specific resources that support employee retention

“My biggest worry is that funding will be cut, we’ll lose our jobs, and individuals will have no one to take care of them. when you see inflation and all the vacancies, you start to worry that agencies will shut down. Where will individuals be then?”

The DSP Experience: Pride & Commitment

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>C) DSPs report feeling a general lack of respect from supervisors and management, family members, and the field as a whole.</p> <p>This perceived lack of respect, including the lack of respectful compensation, contributes to decisions not to make direct support a long-term profession.</p>	<p>6) Provide active and ongoing outreach inside and outside the field highlighting specific instances of the impact of DSPs and their importance within the system.</p> <p>7) Increase awareness of advocacy channels and support for DSPs, so they can tell their stories of sacrifice, and advocate for the needs of the profession.</p> <p>8) These findings also point to previous recommendation B5 (DSP compensation package).</p> <p>9) DSPs must be part of every conversation, at every level. Close the system's communication loop by including DSPs at every stage, in every facet, from every angle. They are essential, and the system must treat them as such.</p>

"We are people like everyone else. We have families, [and] our time is valuable, like everyone else's. Respect us by paying us appropriately and setting normal work hours."

"Some of the new incentives mean newer people are making more or equal to those who have been there for years. When a longer-term person makes almost the same amount as a new hire, then [it's clear] the agency and the field does not view it as a profession. Where is the reward for making it a profession?"

The DSP Experience: Pride & Commitment

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>D) DSPs spend a lot of their own resources helping the system support individuals served – whether through job-related use of their personal property and vehicles, infringement upon their personal time, or using their own funds for individuals’ outings, food, entertainment, etc.</p> <p>This poses significant problems. It’s especially difficult when DSPs pay these expenses out-of-pocket, and then must wait for reimbursement that may not fully cover the incurred costs: e.g., DSPs report that mileage reimbursement rates are not adequate for vehicle usage, wear and tear, cleaning, and the liability that comes with using a personal vehicle for job-related travel.</p> <p>Broken down vehicles and (sick) children are among the primary reasons DSPs call off.</p>	<p>10) Evaluate employer policies regarding job-related activities, including full, proactive funding for expected expenses.</p> <p>11) Consider increased vehicle stipends/ reimbursement and/or more frequent employer-owned vehicle usage.</p> <p>12) Encourage agency employers to develop and support rideshare programs (perhaps using agency vehicles).</p> <p>13) Establish large-scale partnerships with auto parts/repair shops to provide discounts on those materials and services.</p> <p>14) Address childcare challenges by –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying for increased childcare tax credits • Working cooperatively with partners to establish state- or agency-owned childcare centers with sick-child care options

“I worry that the new hires are not getting the same level of training we received before starting. Now, it seems like they get minimal training and are put on the job. They do not know as much about medicines, diet, behaviors, etc.”

“I am often scheduled to work at different sites that are far away from each other. I have to use my own car to go between sites, and most of the time I am running on empty, literally and figuratively.”

The DSP Experience: Pride & Commitment

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>E) DSPs lament a general lack of quality supervision (being a skilled DSP does not automatically equal being a skilled supervisor), and they applaud agency employers that maintain frequent, open, and all-way lines of communication along the supervisory chain.</p> <p>DSPs sometimes feel disappointed and frustrated that direct supervisors and on up the chain of command to Executive Directors/CEOs aren't more actively and visibly involved in the day-to-day processes of caring for individuals served – particularly when those are the people developing policies and procedures that are burdensome, counter-productive, counter-intuitive, and arcane.</p>	<p>15) Prioritize quality and ongoing supervisory skills training, perhaps by leveraging CBDD support to host training and leadership development programs for supervisors at state, regional, and local levels utilizing existing resources and platforms.</p> <p>16) Develop and establish a system-wide and compensated DSP mentor program to help new and current employees exchange information and share advice.</p> <p>17) At the agency employer level, support increased 1-to-1 time between supervisors and DSP direct reports.</p> <p>18) Support DSPs to understand policies and procedures tied to DODD regulations, and encourage DSPs to vocalize when those policies and procedures place undue burden on them and/or the people they support. Deliberately tie this in with developing DSPs' advocacy skills.</p>

“The system doesn’t value the position. It’s like a caste system. The people at the top make choices and do not ask DSP opinions. We have to make things work, and people don’t bother to find out what we think should happen.”

“I don’t see my supervisor often, maybe once a month. I am a good DSP, but would like more guidance and reassurance.”

The DSP Experience: Pride & Commitment

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>F) The perceived agency employer response to the workforce shortage – hiring individuals with minimal qualifications and inadequate training – is detrimental to both quality of support and morale.</p> <p>Some DSPs cited supervisors that have refused to hold new hires accountable for responsibilities and procedures out of fear of losing personnel. When this happens, the result is an erosion of standards.</p>	<p>19) Work with agency employers to ascertain the scope of this issue and determine the best actions accordingly.</p> <p>20) Work with agency employers to develop accountability checklists that can pair with new-hire/90-day/other bonuses.</p> <p>21) These findings also point to previous recommendation E15 (supervisory training).</p>
<p>G) DSPs want employers to prioritize training and professional development, particularly in “advanced” areas like severe behaviors; medical care and procedures; communicating with individuals’ family members; aging clientele; and addressing individuals’ sexual activity and intimacy.</p> <p>Even basic training, though, due to the workforce crisis, may not be given the attention and weight it requires. As a result, many experienced DSPs, and some newer ones, feel that just-hired DSPs are ill-equipped to deliver the quality of support needed and/or wanted by individuals.</p>	<p>22) Overhaul core and continuing training requirements, including “refresher” and renewal courses.</p> <p>23) DSP compensation needs to be commensurate: the system can’t reasonably expect highly trained, technically skilled DSPs to work at wage levels that contradict their professional development levels.</p> <p>24) These findings also point to previous recommendation E15 (supervisory training).</p>

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FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>H) Many DSPs handle sensitive medical situations, and they have reported that training for medical care is not as thorough as it was in the past.</p> <p>DSPs trained to handle these more complex situations oftentimes receive the same payment rates as those who have not been trained and are not qualified for managing these vital tasks.</p>	<p>25) Develop a system-wide DSP classification or specialization matrix that matches specific training and skill sets with corresponding and commensurate payment rates.</p>
<p>I) DSPs should be involved in Individual Service Plan (ISP) development: they often have solid and objective information regarding individuals' needs and wants, and goals and dreams.</p> <p>ISPs provide DSPs' daily guidance, so they need to be easy to understand and (more) realistic, relevant, and obtainable.</p>	<p>26) Pursue a DODD/system-wide mandate to develop mechanisms for DSPs' input in the ISP process, and when possible, to include "main" or "lead" DSPs in the ISP-related meetings. Ensure that DSPs are compensated for their involvement and contributions.</p> <p>27) Train Service & Support Administrators (SSAs) on the importance of using "easy read" language in ISPs to ensure they the plans are clear and actionable.</p>
<p>J) DSPs state that daily documentation is cumbersome, often repetitive, and they are unclear if the information reported is important.</p> <p>DSPs employed by agency providers that are using electronic means or apps say that these methods are helpful.</p> <p>Tech and mobile devices are changing the landscape for providers <i>and</i> individuals.</p>	<p>28) Assist and support DSPs to understand the importance of what they document, and solicit their input on ways to ensure that document requirements are meaningful and meet required standards.</p> <p>29) Support agency providers' acquisition and use of electronic means or apps to meet reporting requirements.</p> <p>30) Position agency employers at the vanguard of those lobbying for installing/improving communications infrastructure, particularly in rural areas.</p>

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FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
K) DSPs acknowledge and respect the importance of any given individual's family in the successful support dynamic. However, well-meaning family members often complicate DSPs' positions with unrealistic expectations for individuals, outdated views of individuals' capabilities, and/or demands for types of support that fall outside of support agreements.	31) Include conflict resolution, self-advocacy, and communication training in core requirements, with an emphasis on managing difficult conversations. 32) Develop and implement an individual-specific "family participation" section within the ISP, or some other kind of formal agreement that outlines expectations and limitations for all sides of the care and support equation.
L) DSPs are working with an aging clientele, and an increased frequency of dual diagnoses. There's a strong desire and demand for training and skill development suitable for these groups' needs.	33) Work with organizations or government agencies specializing in aging and mental health to offer appropriate training and certifications to DSPs. 34) Develop appropriate training, procedures, and programmatic approaches for geriatric and dual-diagnosed individuals.
M) Some state processes need modified and/or simplified. DSPs specifically cited: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allowing DSPs to use personal contact information for official training registrations, so that credentials are associated with the DSP rather than an employer. • Streamlining the process for certifying independent providers/DSPs. • Increasing the accessibility of DODD's technical assistance for questions and issues related to administrative requirements, billing, etc. 	35) Overhaul policies and procedures for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transferrable training. • Certifying as independent providers/DSPs. 36) Expand the accessibility and scope of DODD's technical assistance.

"Sometimes I have difficulty with dealing with families and guardians. Some of them look down on us and/or do not understand what we can and cannot control."

The DSP Experience: Pride & Commitment

FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>N) DSPs enjoy the purpose of their roles, the ability to help, their experiences with individuals, and the variety of daily activities that helps keep the job fresh. They report that these are job features they would highlight in recruitment efforts.</p> <p>At the same time, DSPs “don’t want to [just] be an agency billboard.”. Some feel the DSP job shown in advertisements is not the full reality of the DSP job and shared that they want to be a part of developing the messaging.</p>	<p>37) Involve DSPs in designing recruitment campaigns.</p> <p>38) Incorporate job shadowing and updated realistic job previews as part of the recruitment/hiring process, so that candidates see the genuine experience.</p> <p>39) Develop referral programs whereby DSPs earn money (or other perks they value) when candidates they refer are hired. Provide additional incentives when those new employees maintain their positions.</p>
<p>O) DSPs are hungry for professional development opportunities, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building and climbing a career ladder. • Mentorship – having a mentor, being a mentor. • Adding to their income by adding to their responsibilities. • Quarterly reviews, through which supervisors coach their career ladder climbing, and/or DSPs learn about other opportunities at higher income levels. • Cross-training, so that DSPs develop supervisory skills and administrative knowledge. • Job shadowing, as part of learning and teaching others about additional opportunities. 	<p>40) Involve DSPs in developing system-wide mentoring/coaching structures.</p> <p>41) These findings also point to previous recommendation E15 (supervisory training).</p> <p>42) Provide active and ongoing outreach to secondary-school- and college-age individuals to learn about the career opportunities in this field and engineer a viable pipeline of qualified recruits through certificate/ credentialing opportunities.</p>

“There are not enough educational opportunities to move up in the ranks. Go beyond proficiency training.”

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FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>P) DSPs are wildly creative. They figure out how to make ends meet by piecing together public assistance, charity, bartering, entrepreneurship, 2nd and 3rd jobs, and working massive amounts of overtime. Their innovations, however, often sacrifice their health and well-being.</p> <p>DSPs don't have the time and/or resources to do the things that others take for granted: vacationing and weekend trips; hobbies; time with family; returning to school and continuing education; goal setting and career planning; and other personal development experiences.</p>	<p>43) Involve DSPs in designing creative solutions for taking care of their own health and well-being.</p> <p>44) Host (or encourage participation in existing) CBDD, agency employer, and/or community "wellness days" which include basic health screenings.</p> <p>45) Involve DSPs in designing innovative solutions for encouraging and supporting relaxation, travel, creative, educational, and other personal and professional endeavors.</p> <p>46) Support collaboration among CBDDs, agency employers, and community resources to secure discounts and/or incentives for DSPs.</p>

"I haven't been on a week vacation in years."

"I wish I had time for outdoor activities. It would be fun to go on an RV vacation. I would enjoy joining a walking group. Nature helps me reenergize."

"I wish I could spend more time with my grandson and new granddaughter."

"I don't have time to take care of my own home. I fear that it's going to cost me a lot in the end. My roof needs repaired, and I don't know what else I haven't had time to notice."



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Synopsis

This report demonstrates a mismatch between Direct Support Professionals' wages, and their professional-level attitudes, duties and responsibilities, and expectations. While this report uses data from a relatively self-selecting group of dedicated professionals, numerous studies consistently and overwhelmingly show that keeping effective employees happy in their work and providing them with real opportunities for growth and development helps nurture both job satisfaction and employee loyalty.^a Therefore, it is imperative that stakeholders listen to and act on this report's Findings and Recommendations.

The totality of this report's Findings doesn't – and can't – disregard the reality that even iron-clad employee loyalty breaks down when DSPs –

- Lack reliable and supportive supervisors, i.e., managers who set consistent standards and apply accountability and expectations universally
- Must choose between doing the work they love, and earning incomes that support their families

Also, there are Recommendations in this report designed to adjust some realities, e.g., increasing organizational participation: consider welcoming DSPs to conversations from which they may have been shielded, or for which the value of their participation may have been overlooked or underestimated.

Next Steps

As stated in the introduction, this report acknowledges that the positive and negative attributes discussed here – which helped shape the Findings and Recommendations – may not be universal. Consequently, it's vital that stakeholders dive more deeply into the experiences of DSPs within their respective purviews. The sponsors, facilitators, and preparers of this report intend for it to prompt conversations and considerations within all stakeholder organizations that review it. Specifically, in comparison to these findings –

- What rings true for your organization?
- Where do you, as an organization, hit the mark, or excel, or fall short in employee support?
- What questions should you ask next?

^a Lavoie, A. (2023, April 5). *There is a new paradigm for developing leaders* | BenefitsPRO. BenefitsPRO. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from <https://www.benefitspro.com/2023/04/05/there-is-a-new-paradigm-for-developing-leaders/?slreturn=20230307165834>