



Rhode Island Statewide Workforce Initiative: DSP Listening Sessions Summary Report

Rhode Island Statewide Workforce Initiative Policy Guidance & Worker Voice Workgroup for Listening Sessions Occurring September-November 2024 and January 2025



Direct Support **Workforce Solutions**
INSTITUTE on COMMUNITY INTEGRATION | UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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The University of Minnesota stands on *Miní Sóta Makhóche*, the rightful homelands of the *Dakhóta Oyáte*.

We recognize the U.S. did not uphold its end of these land treaties. It is the current and continued displacement of the *Dakhóta Oyáte* that allows the University to remain today.

Ongoing oppression and discrimination in the United States has led to significant trauma for many people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, and other oppressed persons. At ICI, we affirm our commitment to address systemic racism, ableism and all other inequalities and forms of oppression to ensure inclusive communities.

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Introduction

Direct support professionals (DSPs) play a key role in helping people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) live the lives they want. While there is a continued national shortage of qualified direct support professionals, the demand for people to fill this role continues to grow as well. Nationwide, DSP turnover rates remain at 48.6% (National Core Indicators Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2024). These persistently high turnover rates contribute to burnout for current DSPs and a reduction in quality of support for the people receiving services (Pettingell et al., 2022). In Rhode Island specifically, from the period of January-June 2024, 33% of provider agencies turned away referrals due to DSP staffing issues. The DSP turnover ratio was 15.1% and vacancies were at 11.9% (Pettingell et al., 2024).

As a part of a statewide initiative in Rhode Island, the Policy Guidance & Worker Voice workgroup sought to ensure that the DSP voice and perspectives were well represented in statewide work. Between September and November 2024, the workgroup hosted a series of DSP listening sessions to learn from DSPs about their experiences in the role and gather any feedback or insights they have about challenges they face and resources they need to do their job better. To support accessibility and inclusion, several in-person listening sessions took place throughout the state of Rhode Island in September of 2024, and a series of virtual listening sessions were held in October and November of 2024. Overall, 56 Rhode Island DSPs participated in the in-person listening sessions and 4 Rhode Island DSPs participated in the virtual sessions. The purpose of this report is to outline and summarize trends in the information that was shared by DSPs and to be used to inform outreach and education about the role of the DSPs, engage stakeholders in policy advocacy and change, and make recommendations about other statewide initiatives and activities that can help to overcome the workforce challenges many are faced with today.

Thank you to the DSPs who were engaged in or expressed interest in these DSPs listening sessions. Your feedback and insights about your experiences as a DSP are as valuable as the role you fill in the lives of the many people you support. Thank you to the Policy Guidance and Worker Voice workgroup members who made these DSP listening sessions a success.

Background

Direct support professionals, or DSPs, are skilled professionals who provide direct support to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), which enables them to live and participate meaningfully in their communities of choice. A stable, committed, and highly competent direct support workforce is needed to ensure that people with disabilities have access to appropriate community support and can fully participate in their communities (ANCOR, 2024; Bogenschutz et al., 2014). Continued difficulties with DSP turnover and vacancy rates and low DSP tenure have persisted and over time. According to current national predictions, the shortage will only worsen (PHI, 2023).

Difficulties with recruitment, retention, training, and the engagement of the direct support workforce not only place burden on those who remain in the workforce, but impact the sustainability, growth, and quality of the supports provided to people with disabilities and human services (PCPID, 2024). In response to this challenge,

the DSP workforce continues to receive national attention, with an emphasis on the utilization of workforce solutions and strategies aimed at recruiting, training, and retaining enough qualified DSPs to improve the stability of the direct support workforce. While there are many organizational change initiatives that will help to address this problem, effective systemic improvements in workforce challenges will not happen without policy changes (ANCOR, 2024).

After an investigation conducted by the Department of Justice, after years of underfunding and reduced services, Rhode Island was placed under a consent decree in 2014. The 2014 Consent Decree requires Rhode Island to transform its service system and properly provide services to people with IDD to live their best lives in the community. As a part of this work, over the last several years Rhode Island has invested in improving workforce stability. Efforts to stabilize the workforce have been ongoing in Rhode Island through many initiatives, one of which is the Rhode Island Statewide Initiative (RISWI). A statewide initiative, RISWI Coordinating Council and five corresponding workgroups develop tools, processes, and recommendations that align with effective workforce practices. The University of Minnesota, in partnership with the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities & Hospitals (BHDDH), the Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities, Community Provider Network of RI (CPNRI), and other key groups in Rhode Island support this initiative. As a part of this work, five workgroups were formed around the topic areas of Data and Reporting, Recruitment and Marketing, Selection and Retention, Training and Professional Development, and Policy Guidance and Worker Voice.

Method

Initially, the Policy Guidance and Worker Voice workgroup planned to use a survey to collect insights and feedback from DSPs about their experiences. Other workgroups from RISWI were, at the time, utilizing surveys to collect data from DSPs for various goals and objectives they were working toward. Survey response was low. Several DSPs from a RISWI advisory group and members of the Policy Guidance and Worker Voice workgroup indicated that DSPs were experiencing survey fatigue. Because of this feedback, the Policy Guidance and Worker Voice workgroup decided to conduct listening sessions instead.

The goal of these listening sessions was to learn more about why DSPs stay in their role, what the challenges of their role are, and how they would like to be involved in statewide work. Using data from national literature, information gathered from other RISWI workgroups, and best practices in conducting listening sessions and focus groups, Policy Guidance and Worker Voice workgroup members developed a list of questions to ask DSPs. Questions covered topics such as communication and information dissemination, training and resources, needs, and change, and how DSPs define and feel about their work and role. Policy Guidance and Worker Voice members voted to narrow the list down to a final list of questions.

The Policy Guidance and Worker Voice workgroup aimed to conduct ten in-person listening sessions in September of 2024 across the state that were one hour in duration. They were scheduled at varying times of day to fit the diverse schedules DSPs work. The listening sessions were hosted at various community centers and libraries in all five counties in Rhode Island: Providence, Washington, Kent, Bristol, and Newport.

A flyer detailed the purpose of the listening sessions, who should attend, and how to sign up. The flyer was disseminated via a variety of recruitment sources, including CPNRI provider agencies, the DD newsletter, Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities social media and listservs, the advisory committee/coordinating council, Rhode Island workgroups, RIPIN, the RI self-direct coalition, participants of the CPNRI Frontline Supervisor Training, and leadership members of provider organizations participating in consultation with the Direct Support Workforce Solutions team at the University of Minnesota and Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities workforce coaches. DSPs registered for their preferred session using an online registration form which asked participants key identifying questions, any accommodations or translation or interpreting services they may need, and a series of voluntary demographics questions.

The Policy Guidance and Worker Voice workgroup made plans to host three subsequent one-hour long virtual listening sessions in October of 2024 at varying times of the day using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Following the completion of the second virtual listening session, it became evident that most of the people who signed up for the virtual listening sessions were not Rhode Island DSPs, so the third virtual listening session was postponed. The workgroup decided to host two more virtual listening sessions in November 2024 and extended an invitation only to those on the current registration lists who they could verify were actual Rhode Island DSPs through their registration information and a valid email. Workgroup members attempted to schedule a listening session hosted entirely in Spanish; however, due to scheduling difficulties, attempts will be made to host this listening session in early 2025.

Overall, 56 Rhode Island DSPs participated in the in-person listening sessions and 4 Rhode Island DSPs participated in the virtual listening sessions. At least two Policy Guidance and Worker Voice workgroup members hosted each listening session: one facilitated the session and the other took notes. After introductions, a description of the listening session process, and an explanation of why they were taking place, the facilitator asked DSPs several open-ended questions, listed below.

Listening Session Questions

1. Ask participants to share their name, where they work, and what their role is. Also ask them to share how long they have been employed.
 - Why are you a DSP?
 - How would you define your job?
2. What do you like most about your job? What is most rewarding?
3. What do you like least about your job?
 - What is the biggest challenge you face in your daily work as a DSP?
4. Are there any specific training programs you think would help you do your job better?
5. How would you like to receive communications about important updates and why?
6. If you could change anything about your job, what would it be? Why? What would it take for that to become a reality?
7. Do you have any other comments or is there anything else we should know that we didn't cover?

After all listening sessions were complete, the notes were reviewed and combined. In order to reduce bias when developing themes, two members of the Policy Guidance and Worker Voice workgroup reviewed the responses and organized them by keywords or terms. Narrative summaries were written for the themes that emerged, quotes from respondents were used to reinforce, substantiate, or provide context for narrative summaries. The results of these themes are outlined in the results section below.

Results

In general, DSP participants were appreciative of the opportunity to have their voice heard. They wanted to continue to engage in and have these opportunities and thanked the facilitators.

Results - Demographic Characteristics of DSP Participants

There were 60 direct support professional participants, including those who work for provider organizations and those who are employed by people who direct their own services. Of the 60, 4 DSP participants attended virtual listening sessions, and 56 DSP participants attended in person listening sessions from the following geographic areas of Rhode Island: 27 in Providence (48%), 19 in Kent County (34%), 7 in Washington County (12%), 2 in Newport (4%), and 1 in Bristol County (2%). Their employment tenure as a DSP ranged from 1 month to 47 years. Demographics are in the tables below. Out of those participants who reported demographic information, 83% identified as female and 27% identified as male (n=58).

Table 1. Gender of Participating Direct Support Professionals

What is your gender identity?	#	%
Female	48	83%
Male	10	17%
Non-Binary	0	0%
Other	0	0%
Prefer not to say	0	0%
Total	58	100%

The majority of participants who shared their race/ethnicity identified as White (67%) or Hispanic/Latino (18%) (n= 57).

Table 2. Race/Ethnicity of Participating Direct Support Professionals

Which best describes your race/ethnicity?	#	%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0	0%
Asian	0	0%
Black/African American	2	3%
Pacific Islander	0	0%

White	38	67%
Hispanic/Latino	10	18%
More than one race/ethnicity	3	5%
Other race not listed	1	2%
Prefer not to say	3	5%
Total	57	100%

Most participants who shared their age were from the following age groups: 21-30 years old (24%), 31-40 years old (22%), 51-60 years old (22%), and 41-50 years old (15%) (n=54).

Table 3. Age of Participating Direct Support Professionals

What is your age?	#	%
15-20	0	0%
21-30	13	24%
31-40	12	22%
41-50	8	15%
51-60	12	22%
61-70	5	9%
71+	3	6%
Prefer not to say	1	2%
Total	54	100%

Results – DSP Participants’ Employment History

While some participants came from professions outside of or unrelated to the human services field entirely, many were previously employed in related roles such as certified nursing assistants (CNAs), caregivers, or nursing home staff. They often found the job through a friend or family member recommendation, or they were drawn to the field by a family member who uses supports. Some participants are DSPs for their adult child. Very few came to the job from a pipeline, such as a program called “Peer Pals” in high school or a health career program at a technical high school. Many report they were interested in becoming a DSP because the nature of the work is part of who they are, and they wanted to make a difference in someone’s life by helping them grow and achieve what they want and need in life.

Results - How DSP Participants Describe their Jobs

According to participants, the role of a DSP is diverse and multi-faceted and can be complex and difficult to describe or understand. People within and outside of the field and the role continue to lack clarity on the role of the DSP. One participant said that they “wear many hats.” Participants indicated they play similar roles to nurses, physical therapists, speech therapists, advocates, friends or family, life coaches, job coaches, teachers, counselors, personal assistants, and trusted confidants. Participants indicated they support people with

disabilities with community involvement, life skills, communication, employment, problem solving, and many other aspects of daily life.

Participants detailed their jobs as providing person centered support to foster skills for self-advocacy and self-determination in people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. They work alongside the people they support to explore new interests and strengths, develop their own goals and aspirations for the things they want and need in life, and make progress with achieving the things they find most important in life. One participant said, “we work for them” and another said “[we make] a difference.”

DSPs value their role and responsibility. Participants indicated that many DSPs are people who really care, excel at building a relationship with the person they support, see the role as a career, and are dedicated to making a long-term, life-long commitment to supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities as a DSP. One participant said, “once you become a DSP, you’re a DSP for life.”

Results - Why DSP Participants Stay in their Role

Participants stay in their role because they are able to make meaningful, long-lasting, and collaborative relationships with the people they support and their families, which is part of what enables them to make such a positive impact on their life. Participants stay because they love the person they support, explaining that “it’s really not work when you love what you do” and many report it being the “best job they’ve ever had.” Many feel that “caring comes naturally.”

Participants indicated that the job of DSP is rewarding, and they like the opportunity to empower the people that they support. Giving them the confidence to go after their goals and dreams, be a part of their community, seeing them succeed with something that some people didn’t think they were capable of, helping them gain their voice to be their own advocate, and seeing them take the lead in accessing what they want in life and feeling proud of themselves for doing so are some of the ways that DSPs empower people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. One participant said “Best job I’ve ever had... [I like] getting to help people and help them be independent and see them smile.”

They like experiencing unique challenges, facing unexpected situations, and solving problems alongside the person they support each day. Their experience in the field supports their growth in both their professional and personal lives. DSPs appreciate the opportunities they have to work together with other DSPs to share experiences, ideas, and resources, and form a community of DSPs with the same goals.

Results - What DSP Participants Find Most Challenging

Participants were asked what they find most challenging about their jobs. While DSPs acknowledged the importance and value of helping the person they support to engage in their community, there were challenges they experienced while in the community. They indicated the challenges in communicating with and advocating with employers of people they support and other community members and organizations to

be more welcoming and understanding. One participant indicated the need to help people “recognize that clients can work and do a good job.” The people they support are spending more time in the community, exploring new things, or engaging in things that are less familiar, more challenging, or outside of their previous routines. DSP participants expressed challenges with ensuring that everyone on the person’s care team had the same level of understanding of the importance of this increased community inclusion for the person they support. DSPs who participated in listening sessions also wished that there were more opportunities for the people they support to see friends and peers they used to see more often again.

Another challenge participants noted was communication. In their role as DSP, they often do not feel trusted or supported, and communication across teams creates issues in the support they provide. They experience challenges with collaboration and continuity of care for people supported amongst everyone on the person’s care team. DSP participants indicated inconsistencies in how a person is supported by different members of a person’s team or the range of different perspectives or ideas of what a person supported wants, needs, or is capable of. When all members of a person’s team are not unified or on the same page, the person supported may not always be getting their needs met or get support in the way they want.

Short staffing and staff turnover were noted challenges for participants. Participants indicated that new DSPs don’t understand the job and leave, aren’t properly qualified and don’t want to engage in the work, or “are not team players.” Turnover and uninterested DSPs result in longer shifts for the other DSPs and impacts the people they support because they can’t go in the community if they’re short-staffed.

A related challenge for participants is burnout and a lack of work-life balance. One participant said, “burnout is real...[we] need to find the refresh.” They indicated that the job takes its toll on the health and wellness of the DSP, and DSPs don’t always have the support they need to take care of their own needs. Multiple participants described emotionally taxing situations at work where they and their co-workers do not have the tools or resources to manage, impacting their work and personal life. It can be difficult “dealing with witnessing stressful events.”

A lack of resources was also noted as a challenge. Pay and wage compression was a noted issue in many of the listening sessions, but so was the lack of funds for the people they support. For example, multiple participants indicated that they use their vehicle to drive the person they support, and others indicated that the people they support don’t have enough funds to take part in activities they prefer. DSPs shared how “not all clients are in a financial situation where they can do whatever they want, whenever they want, so this can be restricting for finding things to do.” This is particularly the case for people who live in more rural areas of Rhode Island and people employed by people who self-direct their services. Participants who are employed by people who direct their own services report even greater difficulties with accessing resources they need to be successful such as ideas of activities to engage in while out in the community or financial support to do so. Participants indicated that they struggle to find resources or events that are low- or no- cost in the community for the person they support to participate in. They indicated it is very overwhelming and takes up

time they could spend providing support. Communicating a list of events sorted by Rhode Island region would be helpful to them to be able to provide better person-centered support. Some DSP participants acknowledged how useful already existing activity lists and calendars were, such as one on the RIPIN website or those provided by certain provider organizations for staff as resources. Other DSPs in the listening sessions shared tips and tricks that involve finding events and activities with the person they support.

Administrative tasks are also a challenge for the participants. Ancillary responsibilities, such as medication administration, paperwork, data sheets, monthly notes, nurse notes, billing, and other documentation, were all listed as tasks that take away from their role of providing support. Some DSP participants even indicated that they needed to return from an event or activity early to complete their administrative tasks.

Results – What Training and Professional Development DSP Participants Need

Participants were asked what training and professional development they wish they or their colleagues had. DSP participants reported that opportunities to observe or be observed by other more tenured DSPs or receive coaching or mentorship from either another DSP or direct supervisor, including family members who served as direct supervisors, were some of the most helpful training opportunities they had, especially when they took place early on. Others shared appreciation for opportunities to access training online, on their own time, due to the flexible and accessible nature of this type of learning platform. Some employers offer opportunities for learners to come together and learn in groups which DSP participants agreed was an effective way to reinforce learning content and share learning experiences with others.

DSP participants shared that their training and professional development experiences were often determined by their employers. Examples of variation in training experiences include whether they were expected to complete training while on shift or if it needed to be completed at home, if there were opportunities for continued professional development, if training was limited to mandated training, the format in which training was conducted, and the general experience they had being trained.

Some did indicate that training was sufficient. Others indicated that they did not receive training. Still others said that the training wasn't the right fit for their learning needs or didn't have the tools to apply what they learned to the job. Participants indicated that many new DSPs don't have the competence to support people. This is a challenge particularly for participants who are employed in self-direction, who indicated that they need to seek training on their own using their own resources and funds.

One participant said, "I would feel very badly for anyone entering this field young and not knowing this role." Another participant indicated they did not receive training and that their first day was "trial by fire, no real opportunity for training because of how we take our clients out." Training topics participants listed as being desirable include:

- Disability-specific training
- De-escalation training

- Burnout and stress management training
- “Soft skills” training – such as teaching people how to work

Finally, participants indicated a need for better trained supervisors who can provide support, guidance, and training to DSPs. Many said they do not feel supported by supervisors or management.

DSP participants expressed a desire to meet with colleagues and build a community. They would like opportunities to come together and connect, collaborate, and network with one another. They want to learn more about resources available to them, particularly activities in the community. DSPs could use this community to share ideas and perspectives, problem solve challenges, engage in productive dialogue about how to advance the DSP profession, and learn from one another.

Results – DSP Participants’ Preferred Method of Communication

DSP participants have a variety of communication styles and preferences around the dissemination of important information related to their role, so it is important that key information is communicated and disseminated in a variety of ways, simultaneously, to be most efficient and effective. Emails, text messages, phone calls or voicemails, social media, direct or in person conversations with their employer or supervisor, or a central website were some of the forms of communication that DSP participants indicated finding most helpful. Some want this communication to come from their employer, while others want it to come from outside of their employer. One DSP participant indicated that the ability to access information from websites and email is helpful because “information doesn’t always trickle down to DSPs” from supervisors directly. DSP participants who are employed by people who direct their own services or who work in more isolated locations report finding it even more difficult to acquire important information about their role or communicate and collaborate with other DSPs in the field.

Results – What DSP Participants Would Change

Below are some of the things participants said that they would change about their job.

- Better streams of communication from DSPs to decision makers and vice versa so that they have a better understanding of goals, finances, and other things that impact the person they support
- A better understanding of boundaries of the DSP role and how to work with employers
- A reduction of paperwork and administrative tasks
- Consistent shifts and less short staffing
- Ensure adequate support and resources are in place for DSPs to be successful and feel supported
- Get input from DSPs about what is needed (training, pay/money, non-billable tasks). This includes more support from supervisors to focus on the DSP’s growth and guidance they may need
- Better wages and benefits (including phone and transportation)
- More opportunity for activities in the community and an understanding of what’s there
- Continuing moving in the direction of professionalizing the role of the DSP
- Increase disability awareness and understanding of the role of the DSP

- Since there is so much happening to strengthen the workforce right now, there needs to be a place to put all information so it is accessible and can drive consistency around its use

Limitations

Sixty DSPs participated in the listening sessions. This is a small sample for a statewide set of listening sessions, so caution should be taken in using these results alone to inform future work. However, combining these results with other forms of data, such as quantitative data from bi-annual workforce reports and results of surveys and feedback from key constituents in the state, can be a powerful tool to move work forward.

Additionally, a listening session was not able to be hosted in Spanish due to scheduling conflicts. Results are not fully representative of DSPs in Rhode Island, and efforts should be made to hear from the Spanish-speaking DSPs employed in the state.

Recommendations

Rhode Island partners have invested in a statewide workforce development plan. Continuing to invest in the efforts of key groups and individuals throughout the state can help support the recommendations listed below.

1. Support the DSPs' involvement in the statewide policy and advocacy work focused on improving the state of the DSP workforce, including the improvement of pay and resources. Continue to ensure that the voices and perspectives of DSPs are represented in the statewide initiatives and activities.
2. Find ways to conduct outreach and feedback from a wide range/diverse groups of individuals who are associated with the work and role of the DSP, including but not limited to people from urban, suburban, and rural or remote areas, people from all racial/ethnic backgrounds, including DSPs who are Spanish speaking, people involved with DSP services offered through provider agencies, as well as those by those who direct their own services or whose family members help to direct their services, people with disabilities who are supported by DSPs, and other Rhode Island community members already involved in the statewide efforts.
3. Use the experiences and perspectives of DSPs and others involved in the work to develop communication streams that support the dissemination of new or developing information pertinent to the DSP role, allow DSPs to effectively express and advocate for the things they need to do their jobs well, and allow DSPs to communicate and collaborate amongst themselves.
4. Find new ways to communicate existing training and professional development opportunities and develop those training and professional development opportunities that don't already exist for DSPs to increase their competence and confidence in their role and supports the professionalization of the role statewide in Rhode Island.
5. Continue to recognize and show appreciation for DSPs on both the state and employer level for the challenging yet rewarding, often under-appreciated, invaluable difference that they make in the lives of

people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to be a participant in the communities that are most important to them.

6. Continue to promote, advertise, and create awareness of the role of the DSP to increase community partnerships and understanding of the role, which can support community involvement and buy in of inclusivity and accessibility for DSPs and the people they support.
7. Communicate low-cost and no-cost community events and opportunities to DSPs through resources like the RIPIN events calendar.
8. Continue providing resources and support for employers around ways to better hire, train, support, and retain DSPs.
9. Create opportunities for DSPs to gather and network with one another to learn and problem solve together.
10. Continue to provide competency-based training for supervisors on best practices in supervision and support of DSPs.
11. Provide support, resources, and training to DSPs to manage their own health and wellness, especially to prevent burnout, which perpetuates the negative impacts on DSPs' health and wellness.
12. Explore ways to professionalize and elevate the role of the DSP. Find ways to help people outside of the field understand it as a valued career, even to those who may not be interested in being a DSP.

Conclusion

The role of the DSP is complex, invaluable, challenging, and difficult to describe. It was clear through these listening sessions that the DSPs who participated are highly committed to this work, love what they do, and see it as a career. Despite this, while the demand for committed and competent people in this role continues to grow, high turnover and vacancy rates and low wages are perpetuating this challenge across the country. In Rhode Island, turnover and vacancy rate trends show promise. Continuing to monitor these trends and hear from DSPs themselves can support the understanding of the workforce's needs in Rhode Island.

Based on the voices and perspectives of DSPs themselves in listening sessions, it is evident that DSPs do not always have what they need to be successful in their role. These barriers to success can result in frustration, burnout, and permanent departure from the field of direct support. Therefore, continued efforts to advocate for and develop and communicate access to resources and training are needed.

Using feedback from these listening sessions to inform current workforce efforts can improve services and support for people with disabilities in the state. Continuing to enlist the voice of the DSP, as well as a diverse group of other individuals associated with the role, to advocate for and develop communication, training, recognition and appreciation efforts, and role promotion efforts related to the role of the DSP, both at the individual and statewide level, will allow for improvements at the state level to better support this crucial workforce.

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