



# Rhode Island Statewide Workforce Initiative (RISWI)

## Self-Direction Staffing Survey and Learning Series Pilots, 2025

Prepared for the Rhode Island Statewide Workforce Initiative Coordinating Council and Community Collaborators



## NOTE OF CAUTION:

**The findings from this pilot reflect early, self-reported information provided by survey participants. The results are not representative of all self-directed staffing in Rhode Island and should not be generalized to the full self-direction system. These data are intended to support learning and testing only and should not be used to draw conclusions about the overall self-direction staffing situation in the state.**

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## Introduction

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Self-directed supports allow people to hire their own direct support professionals (DSPs). Individuals decide who works for them, what supports the DSP provides, and when those supports are delivered. This approach gives people more choice and control. At the same time, people who self-direct take on responsibilities that provider agencies usually handle, such as recruiting, hiring, training, scheduling, and paying DSPs.

Rhode Island has been collecting workforce data for several years to understand how well the direct support workforce is working and how stable it is. These data help the state track progress and identify challenges. Until now, this information mainly came from provider agencies. Similar data had not been collected from people who self-direct their services and act as employers of DSPs.

To address this gap, the state of Rhode Island partnered with key collaborators and the Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota to develop and pilot the Rhode Island Self-Direction Staffing Survey. The purpose of the pilot survey was to see whether workforce questions made sense for self-direction and whether the information collected was clear and useful.

Alongside the Staffing Survey, ICI also piloted a Self-Direction Learning Series. The Learning Series is based on ICI's Direct Support Workforce Solutions consulting model and was designed specifically for people who self-direct their services. It focuses on sharing practical information, building confidence, and helping people address common staffing challenges. The goal of the Self-Direction Learning Series Pilot was to provide self-directing employers with additional knowledge, skills and strategies to support them in finding, choosing, and keeping DSPs who met their individual needs. Beyond gaining knowledge transfer, the goal was to have each participant leave with tools and resources they developed to put into action.

## Self-Direction Staffing Survey Pilot

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The Self-Direction Staffing Survey Pilot was designed to test workforce questions and determine whether the survey produced clear and meaningful information. The survey was conducted online using Qualtrics and was available in both English and Spanish. It was open to people who self-direct their services, as well as family members or others who help them and could respond on their behalf.

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The survey was open from June 6 through July 21, 2025. Recruitment took place through a shared flyer distributed by the Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities, RIPIN, and support brokers, including LAZO, Best Life, and the Rhode Island Self-Directed Coalition. A total of 81 usable survey responses were received. Of those responses, 51 were associated with the same fiscal intermediary.

### Survey results

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#### Respondent

- 17 (21%) – person self-directing,
- 59 (73%) – family member of person self-directing,
- 5 (6%) – someone else

#### Number of staff employed

- Average = 3, range 0-7

#### Type of staff

- 28% - parents,
- 21% - other family members,
- 51% - non-family members
- 24% reported having only family members as staff,
- 23% reported no family members as staff, and
- 53% reported having both family members and non-family members as staff

#### Tenure

- More than 50% of staff have worked for person for more than 2 years

#### Wages

- Average = \$27.53, range \$21.00-\$35.00
- For respondents who had only family members as staff, the average hourly wage was \$28.16.
- For respondents who had non-family staff only, the average hourly wage was \$27.05.

#### Overtime

- 11 (14%) paid overtime to staff
- For respondents who had only family members as staff, 6% (1 person) paid overtime.
- For respondents who had non-family staff only, 13% (2 people) paid overtime.
- For respondents who had both family and non-family staff, 18% (7 people) paid overtime.

#### Benefits

- 7 (9%) of respondents offered health insurance to their staff; 5 said they had staff enrolled. 6 (8%) offered other benefits; these included holiday pay, mileage and flexible hours.

#### Turnover

- 58 (75%) had no turnover in 12 months.
- Of those who had turnover, the range was 14%-300%.
- 29% of staff were fired, the rest (71%) quit voluntarily.

#### Vacancies

- 22 (29%) currently trying to hire more staff. Most (14) trying to hire 1 staff person.
- For respondents who had only family members as staff, 17% (3 people) were currently trying to hire more staff.
- For respondents who had non-family staff only, 41% (7 people) were currently trying to hire more staff.
- For respondents who had both family and non-family staff, 30% (12 people) were currently trying to hire more staff.
- Majority (16) trying to fill at least 10 hours per week.



### ***New hires***

- 34% hired new staff in the last 12 months.

### ***Training***

- Respondents were asked if they offered training to their staff. Of the 78 respondents who answered, 37% indicated they offered training to their staff. A variety of training was provided, including documentation, medical, safety, communication, financial, autism training, etc.

### ***Additional comments***

A variety of open-ended comments were also provided. Overall, respondents described ongoing challenges with finding and keeping DSPs, driven by a limited hiring pool, lengthy hiring processes, and rules that make it difficult for staff to work for multiple self-directing employers. Many also noted the need for better training and benefits, such as paid time off and health insurance, and shared concerns about reliance on family caregivers, limits on work hours, and pay and experience not fully reflecting the value and history of DSP work.

## **Self-Direction Learning Series Pilot**

The Self-Direction Learning Series Pilot, conducted July through August 2025, built on the Self-Direction Staffing Survey which shared information about the Learning Series and identified people interested in participating. Survey responses were used to gauge interest and identify individuals who reported challenges with hiring, were actively trying to hire at least one staff person, and wanted additional support. Seventeen people met these criteria and were invited to participate.

Of the 17 people invited, five responded and three fully committed to the Learning Series. All Learning Series activities were held virtually using Zoom to increase accessibility and flexibility for participants.

The Learning Series included several components. It began with a group discovery session where participants shared their experiences with hiring, including challenges and successes. Each participant also took part in an individualized one-on-one consultation. These sessions focused on understanding each person's needs, interests, and past experiences with staffing. During the one-on-one sessions, consultants worked with participants to complete a staffing "needs and wants" worksheet to help guide next steps.

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Participants were also invited to attend up to three learning sessions focused on finding, choosing, and keeping the right staff. Participants could choose to attend one, two, or all three sessions. All three pilot participants chose to attend all sessions. As part of this work, participants created their own recruitment marketing plans, developed structured interview questions tailored to their needs, and used a storyboard tool to create realistic job previews. Participants were also connected to the Rhode Island DSP Realistic Job Preview video and received guidance on how to use it when selecting staff.

The Learning Series concluded with a wrap-up session. This session was originally planned as an in-person meeting with a resource fair at the Paul V. Sherlock Center on Disabilities. Due to scheduling conflicts for two of the three participants, the wrap-up session was held virtually instead.

## Future Considerations and Recommendations

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Self-directed workforce data collected from this pilot study provide initial insights into the workforce providing supports and services to individuals who self-direct. While the results are interesting and data are encouraging, the sample was small in comparison to the number of individuals who self-direct in Rhode Island. To have a more complete picture and understanding of the workforce who provide supports and services to people who self-direct, collecting data regularly and from a greater number of those who self-direct is important. These efforts need to continue.

Rhode Island should conduct another round of self-direction staffing data collection. A follow-up effort would help determine whether lessons learned from the pilot still apply and whether the survey can reach a broader and more representative group of people who self-direct their services. Collecting data again would also support comparisons over time and help the state better understand ongoing staffing challenges and improvements within self-direction.

Going forward, Rhode Island should also build ongoing self-direction staffing data collection into existing processes, such as person-centered planning meetings, routine check-ins, or service reviews. Collecting information as part of normal workflows—rather than as a separate activity—will make the process easier, more consistent, and more useful. To support

this approach, the state should provide clear guidance, simple tools, and staff training. Guidance could include brief instructions or checklists that explain what information to collect, when to collect it, and how to record it. Simple tools, such as short electronic forms or prompts within existing systems, can help staff gather information during regular interactions. Training should focus on both how to collect the data and why it matters, so staff understand its value for improving services and outcomes. Sharing brief data summaries with teams can also reinforce the importance of the data and encourage ongoing use.

The Learning Series was well-received, and feedback included interest in additional topics. Participants noted a benefit in the one-on-one individualized consulting time paired with the group sessions focused on specific strategies and the development of useful tools. Also noted was that the virtual format met everyone's needs and did not require travel or commute time and that minimized time away from work or other commitments.

Recommendations for going forward include identifying which partner or partners within Rhode Island who could carry the series forward, including communication to potential participants, scheduling, coordination and facilitation. This could be an opportunity for more than one partner to collaborate in offering the series to their constituents who self-direct their own services and the ICI team would work with the partner/partners to support rolling this out further and assisting the transition to a sustainable and ongoing resource.