

The Storm Has Ended, But Is It Calm? Addressing DSP Resilience and Burnout After the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has further taxed an already strained workforce within the healthcare sector. Now that the pandemic has subsided, consideration of front-line employees within healthcare and specific to the intellectual/developmental disabilities (IDD) population has faded into the background. Direct support professionals (DSP) providing crucial care in programs that serve our vulnerable population are facing post-pandemic challenges while others move forward. Front-line workers are experiencing burnout more than ever, which is indicated by the continued increase in turnover. State and federal funding does not allow for a living wage, which results in barriers to obtaining reliable transportation, childcare when working, adequate and affordable medical care, and opportunities to participate in wellness (DSPs often work beyond a 40-hour week). Such barriers have been identified as obstacles towards the social determinants of health. DSPs are then presented with the workplace challenge of providing quality care and support to people with IDD. A combination of stressors within and outside the workplace ultimately leads

to burnout, which results in turnover. In response to this, we must explore alternatives to support DSPs within and outside of the workplace.

Introduction

Perception of the Direct Support Professional reached a positive zenith during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when the public declared caregivers to be heroes. This sentiment was further validated by increased hourly compensation, otherwise known as ‘hazard pay.’

As the pandemic continues to wind down, one must consider whether solidarity amongst all of us during a universal crisis is beginning to unravel as we return to our pre-COVID routines and habits; furthermore, as the temporary hero status fades into history, does society need to wait for another crisis to implement steps that prevent DSP burnout?

What We Know/Method

Difficulties recruiting and retaining DSPs over the past three decades due to low wages, a lack of perceived value, and a rise in the number of people with I/DD in need of services have resulted in the DSP shortage crisis (Brandt, 2017). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the average national turnover rate was 43%. With fears of COVID-19 infection and challenges with conflicting family responsibilities, DSPs are now rapidly exiting the workforce (Desroches & Tyo, 2023).

Employees at high risk for burnout are less likely to experience job satisfaction. Studies reveal that burnout reduces the ability to provide the best quality of care possible and increases the risk of medical mistakes. Professionals working with I/DD are characterized by relatively high levels of stress primarily because of the emotionally demanding work environment, the heavy workload, challenging client behavior, low occupational status, role ambiguity, and limited job autonomy (Finkelstein et al., 2018).

What We’ve Done

Solutions and opportunities are being piloted at our organization that should be replicated elsewhere. Several of these solutions are outlined below.

The *DSP Certification Program* at Allies, Inc. is a self-enrichment program that supports those who would like to gain additional knowledge in the field, enhance professional skills beyond required training, and learn about themselves along the way (Allies, Inc., 2023). The Social Innovation Lab, sponsored by the Woods Foundation, served as a catalyst for the program. Not only does this enhance skills, but the additional pay at the end of the program can improve the quality of life while working only at one job. Recently, the DSP Certification Program was approved for college transfer credits at the University of Arizona Global Campus. This ensures that DSPs who were hesitant towards furthering their education have a “leg up.”

While one would think that social innovation begins as an isolated concept, it must be realized that industry-wide needs drive industry-wide thinking. To this end, this program has been replicated by Mountain Lake Services in New York State (NADSP, 2021).

Additionally, the National Association for the Dually Diagnosed has developed a two-year pilot program to fund 3,000 DSPs to be certified through the Competency Based IDD/MI Dual Diagnosis Direct Support Professional Certification Program. A total of \$3 million in one-time funds (ABCD, 2023) have been availed.

Today's workforce represents people from multiple cultures and diverse backgrounds. To this end, agencies must work to determine the needs of their workforce; this can be done through surveys as well as committees (Weller et al., 2022) such as a *Workforce Engagement Committee*. Being able to tap into the social determinants affecting our DSPs and exploring interventions to combat compassion fatigue, burnout, or other needs that have yet to be identified is necessary. Ensuring employees are supported by their organizations will aid with retention, job satisfaction, and maintaining and even improving the quality of care for the populations we serve.

Continued reinforcement of professional skills and knowledge for management staff, such as The *New Horizons Essential Managerial Skills Program*, which is a unique program that was developed at Allies, Inc. Ongoing training and mentorship for leaders through programs such as this will increase professionalism, work quality, and effective management skills (Pettingell et al., 2022).

The trend of offering employees access to higher education and postsecondary education benefits is on the rise. Such initiatives include the offering of tuition assistance or reimbursement. Educational partnerships are also pursued where employees (and sometimes immediate family members) are offered discounted tuition rates to various colleges and universities. This incentive is a strategy that closes the gap between a DSP attending college versus not being able to attend. Moreover, the organization will benefit from an increase in skills and professionalism offered by employees who take advantage of these benefits (Pettingell et al., 2022).

The evolution of the DSP Certification Program has led to a new social innovation that focuses on frontline supervisors. The *Standard of Excellence Reinvestment Program* proposes for Allies, Inc. to share the rewards of success with support managers. The organization postulates that operating costs decrease when quality services are provided in an efficient manner. To incentivize such practices, the organization proposes to pass on a percentage of the savings to high-performing support managers. The aim of this program is to improve service quality, increase savings, and increase the compensation offered. Support Managers, through increased earnings, then enjoy an improved quality of life.

Policy Actions and Recommendations

NJ S4102 is a bill that was put forth by the New Jersey Community College Consortium for Workforce and Economic Development to create a career development center where

participating provider agencies mentor and provide on-the-job training for the role of a DSP (State of New Jersey, 2021). While this bill did not pass, it laid the groundwork for more bills to be proposed and advocated for. Provider agencies must remain active and aware regarding local and national government action. This can be achieved through active participation in provider trade organizations.

Provider agencies should explore and address the needs of their staff. As such needs are met, agencies will benefit from improved staff resilience. DSPs and front-line supervisors benefit when they can achieve self-sufficiency without working multiple jobs.

Providers must continue to strive towards implementing best practices and guidelines relative to compensation, equity, education, and career advancement. Resources such as the National Association of Direct Support Professionals, the President's Committee on Intellectual Disabilities, and accrediting bodies offer evidence-based solutions for supporting the human service workforce.

Conclusion

Prevailing societal perceptions regarding DSP roles, lack of funding, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic have led to a workforce facing significant barriers to resilience and self-sufficiency, resulting in a high prevalence of burnout. Provider agencies are looking for solutions that are effective yet affordable and sustainable.

This review has offered innovative programs where benefits outweigh costs, resulting in increased quality of services, increased compensation and career opportunities for DSPs and their supervisors, and increased savings for provider organizations working within the limits of finite resources.

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