

## **Does the Use of Stay Interviews on a Regular Basis Enhance Direct Support Professionals' Retention?**

**By:** Maya Taylor-Cook<sup>1</sup>, Dylan Hicks<sup>2</sup>, Scott Spreat<sup>3</sup>, Theresa Wilson-Fall<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Aurora Staffing, Retention and Employee Engagement Policy Strategist

<sup>2</sup>Woods Services, American University

<sup>3</sup>Woods Services, Vice President, Evaluation & Research

<sup>4</sup>Woods Services, Learning and Development Special Projects Lead

**Keywords:** interviews, direct support professionals, retention, employee, care staff

### **Abstract**

This study examines the relationship between stay interviews and staff retention amongst direct support professionals (DSPs). This study determines the effectiveness of stay interviews of 132 direct care staff members across the Woods System of Care (WSoC). Stay interviews are conducted throughout the first six months of employment to determine staff satisfaction, and best efforts are made to improve satisfaction if staff require additional support; this study only includes the results of staff members who have surpassed their 3 months of employment. Results determine that there is a statistically significant relationship between employee termination status and stay interviews. The relationship between termination status and zero stay interviews is only moderate, but still something that can have an impact, as getting no stay interview decreases the likelihood of employees still being employed.

### **Introduction**

The labor shortage of DSPs is apparent; globally, there is an industry-wide shortage that can negatively impact the care provided to individuals served (Allen and Shembavnekar, 2023). A DSP works directly with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities with support of daily activities. DSPs advocate for individuals served and provide support with person-centered care. The labor shortage can be attributed to a few reasons, namely low pay, job insecurity, and poor working conditions; these factors existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but have continued to persist (Allen and Shembavnekar, 2023). The labor shortage causes negative effects on organizations as they are unable to hire or retain staff to be able to operate programs to the highest potential, with many DSPs leaving soon after starting the job, resulting in high turnover rates and costs (Radar Health, 2024).

Historically, the turnover of DSPs is very high. DSP annual turnover was calculated to be 40.8%, and the vacancy rate was calculated to be 22.0% (Provider Consortium, 2024). This can be due to many reasons: the difficulty of the role, the low pay associated with the role, and the general state of the job market. However, the role of a DSP can be rewarding, and staff members form emotional connections with individuals served and support them, sometimes for long periods of time; staff can see the growth and the positive impacts of the support provided. It has been identified that this costs an organization a large sum of money to cover the costs associated with

turnover through recruitment, onboarding, and hiring. High turnover can also have negative effects on the individuals served as they are often unable to build stable relationships with changing staff or with other staff members, which can negatively impact the care provided. Therefore, organizations have had to be creative in their retention strategies.

This project is designed to determine the effectiveness of ‘Stay Interviews’ used with newly hired employees and to identify the impact on retention with DSPs within the Woods System of Care (WSoC). The WSoC is a population health management service that services individuals with intellectual, developmental, and behavioral health disabilities, providing life cycle care. A pool of 132 employees has been identified within this project for qualitative data research across the five WSoC affiliates around Pennsylvania and New Jersey. All staff in this study were hired for direct care positions. These staff members underwent an orientation before starting on-site, and they then received on-the-job training at the placements.

Stay interviews are identified as check-in points that occur periodically after employment for new hire staff to see how they are getting along in their new roles. The stay interviews can help staff adjust to their new roles and ask any questions they may have. They can also provide a point of contact for staff should any issues arise. At the WSoC stay, interviews are conducted via phone, either through conversation over text messages or phone calls. Stay interviews are conducted by the Retention and Employee Engagement Policy Strategist, whose role is dedicated to staff retention. All feedback from staff is then passed along to the Director of Residential Staffing and other WSoC team members, who provide additional support to staff and escalate any issues or concerns to the relevant employees at the given affiliate. This role is dedicated to supporting staff in their transition into their new roles while simultaneously looking for trends and patterns relating to staff retention.

It can be identified that there is a gap in the market for staff follow-up once they have started on shifts. New hire employees are supported throughout the recruitment process, and once they start on shift, they have the support of the staff within the home, but not one dedicated role for the purpose of ensuring the satisfaction of new hire staff. With the full experience of onboarding being overwhelming for many new hire employees, a Paychex study has identified that 52% of new hires feel undertrained after onboarding (Paychex cited in Tsipursky, 2023). This correlates to negative impacts on staff retention, with 51% of employees saying they would go ‘above and beyond’ for an organization if they had a good onboarding experience. However, a bad onboarding experience may negatively impact employee engagement (Paychex, cited in Tsipursky, 2023).

Most organizations offer competitive benefits. However, staff are not being convinced to stay in a role based on benefits alone, as employees can find similar benefits at each organization they move to. This means that organizations have come up with new ways to ensure staff retention. One of these ways is with the specific retention of dedicated staff in the human resources department. The retention staff periodically checks in with employees after they start on the job to see how they are getting along in their new roles and overall gather feedback on employee satisfaction. Employees are sent an initial check-in text, and upon their reply, the request to schedule a phone call is given. These calls and questions are used to identify any issues the staff member may be having, and directives to speak with supervisors/managers may be given, as well

as follow-up with retention supervision to offer the best well-rounded support to employees. It can be demonstrated that some employees who have had issues find resolution using this method and subsequently stay on in the role when they could have potentially resigned, with some employees staying past six months and receiving promotions. Many employees express gratitude for the stay interview and have shown appreciation for the support, with a few employees expressing that this is not something they have seen at other organizations in the field, demonstrating this is an innovative approach to retention (Wellbox, n.d.).

## **Literature Review**

Retention of DSPs is a global and industry-wide issue. Reduced staff correlates to reduced care for individuals served, with turnover rates being a large issue within the industry. Turnover impacts individuals served in the capacity of reduction of care as well as the ability to form emotional connections with staff and trust for staff when they aren't provided the time to get to know staff in the long term.

The WSoC has evolved to be innovative with employee engagement and retention strategies. The WSoC employs approximately 6000 people and promotes workplace practices and cultures to lead to satisfied employees and, therefore, improve client care and business outcomes. Employees are at the foundation of these ideas and outcomes, and it is important to go directly to staff for information on satisfaction. Thus, increasing employee engagement methods is vital (Hansen-Turton, Shubiak, 2023). As mentioned previously, staff satisfaction and positive retention can lead to improved outcomes for individuals served, which can be identified as one of the foundational aspects of the role.

The WSoC offers competitive benefits, and in order to engage and retain employees, it is important to be creative with benefits methods. Adapting existing benefits to ensure staff satisfaction is crucial; Woods Services (an affiliate of the WSoC) introduced an improved retirement plan to help staff get the most out of their retirement. Employees were offered to transition to the new plan or remain at their current plan, which gave employees the choice and time to process and research this change. This improved retirement plan proved to be a large success, with 93% of employees opting to enroll in the program shortly after the rollout. Woods Services prioritizes the overall health and wellness of employees; they offer advanced medical and dental benefits for staff members; one way they achieved this was by partnering with Homestead Health plans to contain healthcare costs and enhance access to healthcare. Another way this has been achieved is by opening the onsite Medical Center for primary care needs for staff and families of staff to use free of charge. The Medical Center offers not only financial benefits for staff but also location and opening hours to accommodate staff, making healthcare more accessible (Hansen-Turton, Shubiak, 2023).

Another benefit of the WSoC is the support staff receive for their professional and personal development through enhanced education programs. Woods Services has a dedicated staff member to assist and advise employees with college applications, assisting with overall support and encouragement to seek further/ higher education if the employees wish. Woods Services partners with many colleges to offer tuition discounts and tuition repayment schemes to make higher education more accessible to employees. Woods Services has experienced a 90%

retention rate among employees who have participated in one of the discounted college programs, with an 81% retention rate among employees receiving any one of the educational benefits, which includes tuition reimbursement and student loan payments (Hansen-Turton, Shubiak, 2023).

As demonstrated by the dynamic variety of employee benefits, WSoC continues to drive innovation in professional and personal growth through many social enterprises. One key example of this is the Social Innovations Project at Woods Services. This project allows for small groups of employees to connect and speak on ideas they have to better the organization. These ideas come directly from staff who are working in the field and have experienced each day with the organization. Therefore, their ideas for improvement are invaluable. Staff are provided with a professor and mentor to work with who helps assist with creating a mock plan and provides a small budget to fund their ideas to trial them out. This program has seen great success with many successful social enterprises launched; an excellent example is the Woods Wear store located at the Woods Services Langhorne campus in PA. Woods Wear is a custom apparel store where residents of Woods Services design, print, and sell t-shirts, hats, headbands, sweatshirts, and more. The store officially opened in January 2019 and has provided custom items for a number of local businesses and organizations. Woods Wear has an online store for online ordering and provides staff uniforms. Enterprises such as this encourage staff to bring forth their ideas for improvement for the organization and provide them with a voice and a platform to execute these ideas. The Woods Wear store originated from a Social Enterprise idea, thus demonstrating the clear value and success this program has provided for staff and residents. The aim of this study is to increase staff retention of DSPs to keep them employed within the organization for longer periods of time, thus reducing staff turnover. It has been reported that the recruitment and replacement of a single Direct Support Professional can cost in the neighborhood of \$5000 (Institute for Community Integration, undated). Turnover costs then take away financing from other areas of an organization. This means retention is synonymous with lowering turnover costs.

Another objective is to increase overall staff satisfaction and investigate the linkages between staff satisfaction and retention. It can be understood that when employees are satisfied at their place of work, they are more likely to perform better and remain longer at the company/organization, which directly positively impacts retention rates (Indeed, 2023).

## **Methods**

This data study is collected through quantitative data methods through stay interviews held with new hire DSP employees throughout the WSoC. The stay interviews are conducted at varying points of employment. After employee orientation, they are provided with an orientation satisfaction survey alongside an introduction and contact information for retention and employee engagement strategists. The first stay interview is held during one week of employment (post-orientation) to check in and see how employees are getting along in their first week. An initial text message is sent to ask how the first week has been, and upon the response, a phone call is arranged to ask feedback questions about experience and introduce the role of the retention and employee engagement policy strategist in more depth. The next stay interview is conducted at one month of employment; the same process occurs, as well as the feedback questions. An anonymous survey is sent to employees specifically regarding on-the-job training (OJT) and

orientation experience. The next stay interview will be conducted through a survey sent at three months of employment. Lastly, the final stay interview occurs at six months of employment. In between stay interviews, employees are encouraged to reach out at any point if they have any questions or concerns.

However, not all employees participated in the interviews, which gave an opportunity for a comparison group. Some employees did not respond at all to the stay interview, meaning they did not respond to the initial text message or any follow-ups. However, it is not common for employees to not respond in any sense to the stay interviews. The process for this is described in more detail in the next section.

The employees provide feedback throughout the stay interview. Some of this feedback requires follow-up for the employees; employees are directed to managers or the appropriate department, and then follow-up is completed internally. Some feedback may require multiple feedback conversations and multiple departments to work with the employee to find a resolution.

## **Results**

Over the course of the study, 132 individuals were hired into Direct Support Professional positions within the WSoC. The study only includes employees who have surpassed 3 months of employment, with the maximum length of employment being around a year. Of this number, 110 were still employed by WSoC at the conclusion of the study. This suggests a retention rate of 83% for the 12 months of study. Of particular interest was whether the “stay interviews” had any impact on retention. This data is presented in the figure below. Retention data and whether the employee received at least one “stay interview” were submitted to Chi-square analysis. The analysis yielded a statistically significant Chi-square value of 4.995 with 1 degree of freedom. The probability of achieving this outcome by chance alone would fall below 5%. The findings suggest that the use of “stay interviews” was significantly associated with increased retention.

	No “Stay Interview”	At least 1 “Stay Interview”
No Longer Employed	7	14
Still Employed	15	96

After conducting various statistical analyses, the broad findings are that there is a modest relationship between receiving a check-in call sometime within the first six months of employment and the likelihood that the person who received that call is still working within the WSoC. As long as an employee has at least one check-in call with the retention and employee engagement strategist, there is an increased likelihood that their employment has not been terminated.

That being said, not receiving a stay interview call was correlated with the number of terminated employees. The specific number of calls outside of zero did not matter, only that an employee received at least one. On the opposite side of the spectrum, those who did not receive any check-in calls were more likely to be terminated than those who did.

## **Discussion**

This research does not determine other factors of retention, for example, external factors of gender, race, and social/economic status; therefore, it cannot be fully determined that the stay interviews are the sole reason for the increase in retention.

This study also does not factor in internal factors from the organization, such as management, improved training, or pay. Therefore, again, it cannot be determined that this study is the empirical reason for staff retention. Other limitations include a lack of response from employees; not all employees responded to stay interviews, meaning there is missed data.

Other limitations include the fact that this is a small sample size of 132. Therefore, it can mean the data may be limited. This study was also conducted over a year, which is a relatively short time period. Due to the high turnover of the industry, many of the research participants left the role by the time they reached six months of employment. This study only identifies employees who have surpassed their first 3 months on the job, which causes limitations of this sample size. In turn, this then limits staff members who have left the role before their first 3 months. However, this data set is taken over a broad range as data was collected throughout the five affiliates. Term data was collected and is correct to the best knowledge at the time of conducting the research.

Further research on this topic would include a larger number of participants and a longer period of research time. This would provide opportunities for more participant experiences and further information from participants. Focus groups may also be utilized in future research to bring participants together for group discussion and experiences. However, employees may feel more comfortable sharing experiences anonymously.

In conclusion, it can be determined that the WSoC has seen the effectiveness of the use of stay interviews for the retention of DSPs. Stay interviews have been proven effective in assisting staff with settling into their roles, as well as overall retention, thus reducing terminations. Stay interviews have not been the only method of improving staff retention; additional programs, such as educational development programs and social entrepreneurship programs, support both personal and professional development. Investing in employees demonstrates to employees that they are valued as well and fosters an environment of support.

## References

Allen, L., Shembavnekar, N. (2023) The Health Foundation Social Care Workforce Crisis Available at <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/blogs/social-care-workforce-crisis#:~:text=The%20most%20up%20to%20date,must%20be%20ethical%20and%20sustainable.> [Accessed 26 August 2024]

Hansen-Turton, T., Shubiak, P. (2023) *Thriving Through Transformation* Hansen-Turton, T., Shubiak, P. Social Innovations Journal: Bryn Mawr, PA

Indeed (2023) What is Job Satisfaction? (Plus Tips on How to Increase it) Available at <https://uk.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/what-is-job-satisfaction#:~:text=When%20employees%20feel%20satisfied%20at,know%20what%20to%20focus%20on.> [Accessed 30 July 2024]

Institute for Community Integration. (undated). Direct Support Workforce. University of Minnesota: Institute for Community Integrations. <https://ici.umn.edu/program-areas/community-living-and-employment/direct-support-workforce>

Provider Consortium. (2024). 2024 Pennsylvania Direct Support Professional & Front-Line Supervisor Compensation Study. Center for Disability Information.

Radar Health (2024) Staff Retention in Social Care: How Can Technology Help? Available at <https://radarhealthcare.com/news-blogs/staff-retention-in-the-care-sector/#:~:text=Staff%20retention%20is%20vital%20for,in%20the%20quality%20of%20care.> [Accessed 26 August 2024]

Tsipursky, G. (2023) A Guide to Onboarding New Hires (For First-Time Managers) Harvard Business Review Available at <https://hbr.org/2023/07/a-guide-to-onboarding-new-hires-for-first-time-managers#:~:text=Regular%20follow%20ups%20can%20help,and%20make%20changes%20if%20necessary.> [Accessed 18 July, 2024]

Wellbox (n.d.) Why Onboarding is Important for Business Available at <https://blog.wellboxes.co.uk/why-onboarding-is-important-for-business/#:~:text=Continue%20check%20ins%20throughout%20the,set%20when%20they%20first%20joined.> [Accessed 26 August 2024]