



BRIEF #1

Utah LTSS Project

Recruiting and Retaining
Quality Direct Support Professionals

July 2024

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About the Human Services Research Institute

The Human Services Research Institute is a nonprofit, mission-driven organization that works with government agencies and others to improve health and human services and systems, enhance the quality of data to guide policy, and engage stakeholders to effect meaningful systems change.

About Utah State University Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice

The Institute for Disability Research, Policy, & Practice (IDRPP) at Utah State University is Utah’s federally designated University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD).

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Introduction

The Utah Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) strives to ensure all Utahns have fair and equitable opportunities to live safe and healthy lives. Through its Division of Integrated Healthcare (DIH), Division of Aging and Adult Services (DAAS), and Division of Services for People with Disabilities (DSPD), DHHS has established a comprehensive long-term service and Support (LTSS) system. In recent years DHHS and its divisions have engaged in multiple initiatives to improve services and supports.

DHHS contracted Human Services Research Institute (HSRI) to build on current initiatives to strengthen LTSS and make recommendations to DHHS on how to further these efforts. DHHS and our Steering Committee requested that we prioritize opportunities that focus on:

- Inclusion – Support and honor people’s choices for where they live and who they live with. Give people options for receiving community services and participating in competitive integrated employment.
- Service Quality – Ensure that people in Utah equitably receive the services that they need. Promote high quality services and highly qualified providers and direct support professionals.
- Person-Centered Support – Empower people to maintain control over their own life and services (self-direction) by offering holistic support.
- Effective Service System – Improve coordination between agencies, funding, and reimbursement of services to help more people.

In this Research Brief (#1), we explore strategies for recruiting and retaining quality direct support professionals (DSP).

To inform our understanding of this topic, we (1) reviewed relevant Utah policy and program documents, DHHS and divisional websites, and relevant data (as applicable); (2) conducted focus groups and informational interviews to learn from people receiving services, family members, providers, advocacy organizations, and field experts (as applicable), (3) reviewed Utah’s waivers and HCBS programs in other states; and (4) researched a wide variety of literature.

Based on this research we have identified the following key opportunities for DHHS to recruit or retain quality direct support professionals:

- Implement an Awareness and Outreach Campaign Targeted to Culturally Responsive and Diverse Workers
- Establish Long-Term Career Opportunities for DSPs
- Enhance Collaboration with DSPs and Provider Agencies

Our initial research findings were presented to the Project Steering Committee and the committee’s feedback is incorporated in this research brief. The opportunities outlined in this research brief are not final recommendations. Our final recommendations may change as we collect more information on this and other research topics and explore their feasibility. Some opportunities may not be possible for DHHS now or in the future. Our final recommendations will consider all research topics holistically, creating the right plan for Utah. These will be outlined in our final report.



Background

Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), support people with disabilities and older adults to live and fully participate in their communities. They provide a broad range of home and community-based services (HCBS) such as habilitation, personal care, homemaker, companion, transportation, employment, and adult day supports. DSPs bear a high level of responsibility and accountability for the people they support (ICI, HSRI, & NASDDDS 2022, 1). In this Research Brief (#1), “recruiting” means hiring DSPs to work and “retaining” means keeping DSPs at their workplace after they are hired.

National Direct Support Professional Workforce Crisis

In 2001, Amy Hewitt and Charlie Lakin characterized the state of the DSP workforce as a crisis. They noted that this workforce crisis had “serious and detrimental effects on the lives of people who receive community supports” (Hewitt and Lakin 2001, 11). Five years later, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) (with extensive contributions from Hewitt and Lakin) projected demand for DSPs would outpace supply (ASPE 2006). In its 2006 report to Congress, ASPE advanced the idea that providing “adequate levels of high-quality, committed and stable direct support” would require a multifaceted and sustained effort by many people (ASPE 2006, vii).

“[I]t will be essential to work across federal, state and local governments, education and training institutions, workforce investment systems, faith-based organizations, service provider organizations and DSPs themselves in shaping DSP roles into [roles] that offer those who enter with sufficient opportunity and respect to consider it as a viable career decision.” — ASPE

These projections still hold true today—the demand for DSPs continues to outpace the supply of available workers (Laws 2019, 1). In 2022, nationally, 15.3 of DSP positions went unfilled and the average turnover ratio for DSPs was 40.9% (NCI-IDD 2023). High vacancy rates and turnover have resulted in a DSP workforce crisis that threatens to jeopardize decades of progress made toward community living (ICI, HSRI, & NASDDDS 2022, 1).

Broader factors contributing to the creation of the DSP workforce crisis include demographic shifts in the U.S. (such as larger aging population), increased lifespan of people with disabilities, and inflation leading to wage competition (Bradley and Hiersteiner 2023, 9). Escalating this crisis are job-related variables such as a lack of job/field awareness, low wages, limited benefits, job complexity, minimal training, unpredictable schedules, physical and emotional burnout, perceived lack of respect and recognition, and few opportunities for career advancement (Bradley and Hiersteiner 2023, 9) (Bradley 2021, 6) (Laws 2019, 1).

The DSP workforce crisis significantly impacts people receiving supports, workers, and provider agencies (ICI, HSRI, & NASDDDS 2022, 7). For people receiving services, this crisis negatively



affects their quality of life (e.g. security, community, relationships, choice and goals (ICI, HSRI, & NASDDDS 2022, 9), puts them “at great risk of harm,” and is leading many to reconsider institutional care (Laws 2019, 1). For providers, the fiscal impact of DSP turnover can be substantial due to on-going recruitment and training costs (Friedman 2018, 7). If vacancies cannot be filled, providers turn away new referrals, discontinue service offerings, or struggle to achieve quality standards (ANCOR 2023, 2). DSPs often bear the burden of covering vacancies by working considerable overtime, leading to physical and emotional burnout (ICI, HSRI, & NASDDDS 2022, 9).

Utah Landscape

As of August 2023, about 44 of every 100 jobs was unfilled across all jobs in Utah (USCC 2023). Coupled with an unemployment rate 2.8% that is far lower than the national average (BLS - Utah 2024), there are not enough unemployed people to fulfill jobs. Utah’s DSP workforce mirror statewide workforce trends, which are keeping DSP vacancy rates high (NCI-IDD 2023). In 2022, the average turnover ratio for DSP’s in Utah was 49.1% (NCI-IDD 2023).

U.S. Census data from Utah reveal a diverse population: in 2020, Utah residents were approximately 60% White, 19% Hispanic, 12% Black, 6% Asian, 1% American Indian/Native Alaskan, 0.2% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 18% some other race (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). In comparison, the American Immigration Council reported that, in 2021, 8.4% of Utah residents were foreign-born and 6% of Utah residents were native-born U.S. citizens that live with at least one immigrant parent (American Immigration Council 2021). Of the DSP workforce in Utah, approximately 50% is White, 12% is Pacific Islander, 7% is Hispanic/Latinx, and 5% is Black/African American (NCI-IDD 2023). Eleven percent (11%) of direct care roles in Utah are filled by immigrants, a higher percent of people than expected given the total percent of foreign-born residents (PHI 2020).

Related to retaining DSPs, in 2023, researchers from the Utah State University, Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice surveyed DSPs in Utah and found that satisfaction with training and employer recognition of employee wellbeing were key factors to supporting DSPs to stay in the workforce (Juhasz, Cutler and Wappett 2023). Further, they found that not all DSPs received training (83% of those surveyed) and, among those who did receive training, the DSPs felt that the trainings were insufficient (Cutler, Juhasz and Wappett 2023).

In recent years, DHHS has taken steps to support DSPs and provider agencies to maintain a stable workforce, and these efforts have demonstrated positive outcomes. DHHS has participated in state and national workgroups established to learn about and identify methods to address DSP staffing shortages. Additionally, for SFY15 – SFY18, the Utah Legislature appropriated funds targeted increasing to DSP wages (DSPD 2017). As of December 2022, DSPD’s State of the Workforce Survey data showed a 26.5% decrease in turnover rate between FY2015 (75.6%) and FY2022 (49.1%) (NCI-IDD 2023). Despite the legislature offering funding to improve recruitment and retention of DSPs through increased wages, there are still not enough DSPs available to provide important supports and services.



Research Findings

To inform our understanding, we reviewed promising practices to address the DSP crisis used in other states and recommended in literature. Our research consistently points to DSP compensation as a primary strategy for recruiting and retaining quality DSPs. Strategies related to DSP compensation (including increased wages/benefits and Medicaid reimbursement rates/methodologies) will be addressed in a future research brief regarding HCBS payment models. What follows are a wide variety of recruitment strategies, retention strategies, and ongoing collaboration strategies for future innovation that other states have used—or experts have recommended—to address the DSP crisis.

Recruitment Research

Many people who are eligible to fill DSP positions are unaware that such positions exist. Several programs have enacted strategies that focus on expanding recruitment efforts to make the broader population aware of DSP work. These efforts result in greater knowledge and interest in DSP work, create direct connections and strengthen aptitudes for those who may be interested in DSP work.

Public Awareness and Advertising Campaigns

To successfully recruit workers, states have taken efforts to make workers aware of the DSP role and available positions. One method for increasing public awareness of the HCBS workforce is to implement publicity campaigns (MACPAC 2022, 7). This publicity can take the form of television/radio/print ads, public service announcements, posters, webpages, logo designs, stickers, and social media posts. Colorado ([CO ARPA Spending Plan](#)) and Hawaii ([HI ARPA Spending Plan](#)) are working to implement public awareness campaigns to publicize the importance of the direct support workforce, garner workforce pride and earn greater respect and appreciation for workers. Wisconsin developed and implemented a [marketing and recruitment plan](#) that included videos advertising the rewarding aspects of supporting older adults and highlighting this work as a career ladder to other health care jobs.

Outreach to Culturally Responsive and Diverse Workers

Immigrant workers play a critical role in the direct support workforce. In addition to filling gaps in the workforce, immigrant DSPs bring particular strengths to the DSP role by integrating cultural and linguistic practices that may match the communities they support. To recruit culturally responsive and diverse workers to the field of home and community-based services, states may (1) conduct multi-lingual outreach in local immigrant communities about the DSP role; (2) establish a mentorship program to partner immigrant DSPs with promising job candidates to share knowledge, information, and support; or (3) partner with resettlement agencies to recruit refugees and asylum seekers to become caregivers. Minnesota developed an awareness campaign called “[Follow Your Heart to a Caring Career](#)” that includes outreach to Minnesotans in 10 different languages, and explains what DSP work is and how people can pursue DSP work. Massachusetts ([MA ARPA Spending Plan](#)) proposed to provide loan repayment incentives for workers with diverse cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds and competence. Maine lawmakers have introduced legislation ([HP 1387](#)) to create an Office of New Americans that would provide pathways for immigrant employees to obtain



professional accreditation and licenses. The office intends to work with employers to help integrate immigrant workers into their workforce.

Realistic Job Previews

States and national organizations have taken steps to prepare people for becoming DSPs. A realistic job preview can help improve recruitment efforts by giving candidates a practical look at a DSP job, including information about responsibilities, needs/preferences of people receiving supports, pay, and schedule. It is important that job previews illustrate “the positive aspects of the work balanced with the challenges” (President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities 2017, 34). Realistic job previews can help ensure that candidates are informed and committed to working as a DSP (Bradley 2021, 5). Tennessee hosts an online [DSP Toolkit](#) that includes realistic job preview videos and serves as a reference for DSPs when considering a career in direct supports. ANCOR, a national organization that supports providers of LTSS, offers recruitment [Tools for Employers](#) including a realistic job preview.

Referral Incentives and Outreach by Direct Support Professionals

Providers have found that a reliable source of skilled, qualified workers is through the skilled, qualified workers they already have on staff. By providing referral incentives, providers can reward a current employee who recommends someone to fill a vacancy. In her white paper on recruitment and retention, Valarie Bradley suggests: “Giving all staff recruitment business cards to hand out to someone who they witness giving great customer service, which basically says, you are great, and you should work here” (Bradley 2021, 8). At the state level, this can take the form of a toolkit or resource detailing referral and outreach strategies, and/or funding or grants to implement strategies.

Online Employment Matching System

A match between the person receiving supports and their direct support workers is important to ensuring positive life outcomes. That match is also crucial to DSP satisfaction, recruitment, and retention of quality workers. Unfortunately, provider agencies and people who are self-directing their supports often experience challenges to finding skilled, qualified DSPs. Some states and providers have developed online portals to help facilitate that match. Oregon connects DSPs with jobs in direct support for people with IDD through its [Impact Oregon](#) website. Posting a job is free for approved providers. In Ohio, [DSPOhio](#) serves as an online recruitment tool that combines awareness-building efforts, aimed at increasing familiarity and pride in the DSP role with potential career opportunities. DSPOhio is a subscription service, and revenues will be used for operations and multi-media buys to sustain the effort year after year (Laws 2019, 10). In New Jersey, the Collaborative for Citizen Directed Supports developed an [Interactive Map](#) that shows the location of employers and DSPs to ensure geographic access. In Washington, Carina (a technology nonprofit) partnered with the Service Employees International Union Local 775, the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, and the Consumer Direct Care Network of Washington to develop an [Online Care Matching System](#) for care workers to connect with families and people who need care.

Expansion of Self-Direction Programs

Expanding access to Self-Administered Supports may alleviate challenges introduced by DSP workforce shortages. “People who are self-directing may be able to attract staff from their social networks who would otherwise not be in the labor pool for DSPs” (Bradley 2021, 10). In addition, this strategy may allow family members who are providing unpaid support to be compensated. The



worldwide COVID-19 pandemic accelerated self-direction throughout the United States (Murray, et al. 2024). Many people began using self-direction and found that it helped to fill voids in staffing (Murray, et al. 2024). Self-direction (a promising strategy for adding people to the DSP workforce) can help to mitigate, but not completely resolve workforce issues (Murray, et al. 2024, 13).

High School and Community College Programs and Internships

To recruit workers, experts recommend creating a career pipeline and reinforcing the skilled, professional nature of direct support work. Some states are developing programs for high school and college students that permit students to train for jobs while completing credit toward their degree (MACPAC 2022). These programs help states identify workers at an earlier age and workers in rural areas. In Washington, the Medicaid agency collaborated with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to develop a 90-hour training program for high school students. Students can participate in this program for both school credit and the work will count toward the required HCBS worker training (MACPAC 2022). The [Community Connections Career Partnership in Ohio C3P\(O\)](#) is a high school education and internship program. The students develop a portfolio to highlight their abilities in DSP competency areas. Upon completion of the program, students earn a credential as well as a high school diploma (Laws 2019, 10). Colorado ([CO ARPA Spending Plan](#)), in collaboration with the Community College System and the Department of Higher Education, is working to establish pathway to allied health professions to build career advancement opportunities for the workforce.

Retention Research

After becoming employed as a DSP, many workers struggle with a perceived lack of respect and recognition, physical and emotional burnout, job complexity, minimal training, and few opportunities for career advancement. As a result of these struggles, DSPs often leave their positions for other work opportunities. Several programs have enacted strategies that focus on expanding retention efforts to meet the on-going needs of the DSP workforce. In addition to supporting better outcomes for people receiving services, these efforts result in greater respect for DSPs, better knowledge and training to support people, as well as long-term commitment to DSP work and longevity on the field.

Supportive and Inclusive Work Culture

Research has shown that workers who feel supported are happier with their organizations and more likely to remain in their positions (Bradley 2021, 6). Therefore, one way to maintain a stable workforce is to create a supportive and inclusive work culture (Bradley 2021, 6). Such a culture can be fostered through respect, recognition of accomplishments, wage transparency, appropriate supervision, opportunities for career development, and opportunities to serve in leadership roles at both the agency and state levels (Galindo 2023, 15). Another way to create a supportive work culture is to establish an employee resource network (ERN). “Employee Resource Networks are private-public consortia whose purpose is improved workforce retention through employee support and training” (Bradley 2021, 9). States have developed toolkits or resources detailing ways provider organizations can foster respect within their organizations and recognize the accomplishments of their DSPs. Tennessee hosts an online [DSP Toolkit](#) that includes several resources for current DSPs and leadership. In Ohio, the Department of Developmental Disabilities released [videos from leadership staff](#) expressing admiration and support for workers during DSP Recognition Week. The Medina County Board of Developmental Disabilities in Ohio offers a [Provider Success Coach Program](#) that provides assistance to DSPs “for issues outside of work that may be impacting their ability to work.”



Competency-Based Training

Competency-based training can improve workers' satisfaction, equip them to provide high-quality care and provide an opportunity to commit to the direct care profession. DSPs who have completed training report a higher intent to stay in their positions (MACPAC 2022, 3).

States determine training requirements for most DSPs, and these requirements can vary widely by state (MACPAC 2022, 3). Some states administer their own training programs, others require provider agencies to train DSPs, and some require third-party credentialing. Required training programs may include pre-service training, on-the-job training that must be completed within a specified time from the DSPs hire date, and/or some form of continuing education.

While training content and competencies also vary by state, many training programs require workers to demonstrate competencies through testing or evaluation. Training programs typically address some or all of the "Direct Service Workforce Core Competencies" recommended by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) – Communication, Person-Centered Practices, Evaluation and Observation, Crisis Prevention and Intervention, Safety, Professionalism and Ethics, Empowerment and Advocacy, Health and Wellness, Community Living Skills and Supports, Community Inclusion and Networking, Cultural Competency, and Education Training and Self-Development (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services 2014).

Beyond core competencies required by states, many DSPs are interested in pursuing training to provide specialized care for trauma, mental health, complex medical and behavioral needs, or vocational needs. Tennessee developed the [Quality Improvement in Long-Term Services and Supports \(QuILTSS\) Institute](#), a competency-based training program designed to strengthen and enhance today's direct service workforce through the ongoing development of DSP knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors. In New York, [Regional Centers on Workforce Transformation \(RCWT\)](#) established the "DSP Core Competencies" and "developed numerous tools to help agencies implement the new competencies, including a [Core Competency Tool Kit](#)" (Laws 2019, 12). The [National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals \(NADSP\)](#) has developed a national certification program that offers DSPs the opportunity to learn evidence-based skills and knowledge, and to commit to the profession by completing three progressive tiers of training. In California, the [In-Home Supportive Services \(IHSS\) Career Pathways Program](#) is an optional program that provides training opportunities to enhance workers skills and compensates DSPs for time spent attending and completing training courses. ANCOR (a national organization that supports providers of LTSS) and Relias (a provider of workforce education solutions) have joined to create 10 unique [Certificate of Achievement](#) programs to assist DSPs to improve skills and advance their careers.

Leadership Training

Leadership training helps DSPs build up the knowledge, skills, and competencies of direct care supervisors (such as day-to-day management, handling conflict between team members, and supporting the work of multiple coworkers) and provides DSPs with an opportunity for career advancement (The Council on Quality and Leadership 2023). In Ohio, the Ohio Alliance of Direct Support Professionals (OADSP) created the [Leadership LAUNCHpad](#) as the "solution to developing the leaders of today and tomorrow in the developmental disabilities field" (Laws 2019, 11). The LAUNCHpad focuses on understanding one's leadership style, exploring leadership skills, improving conflict resolution skills, and creating a professional development and accountability plan.



Career Pathways

A career ladder provides opportunity for DSP promotion and specialization based on completion of competency-based training and tenure that is typically tied to progressive wage increases (Laws 2019, 14). In response to a Relias survey, DSPs reported that career advancement opportunities including viable paths to leadership positions, were extremely important and they would be much more likely to stay in their respective fields if provided strong career advancement opportunities” (Bradley 2021, 6). Additionally, a career lattice provides an opportunity for workers move jobs and advance between similar health-related fields. (MACPAC 2022, 6). “States can enhance career lattices with uniform training that applies to multiple jobs, such as working in nursing homes and assisted living facilities” (MACPAC 2022, 6). Tennessee developed a competency-based training program that is tied to wage increases for workers (MACPAC 2022, 6). Examples of Tennessee’s career advancement opportunities are provided in the [Direct Support Professional Career Pathway](#). In Ohio, the [DSPaths \(Direct Support Professional Advancement through Training in Human Services\)](#) program offers a credentialing program tied to increased wages. DSPs can earn “add-on” rates following completion of one or more certificates (which provide three levels of progressive development) (Laws 2019, 11). “In Maine, the certificate received after completing training can be used in multiple long-term care settings” (MACPAC 2022, 6).

Collaboration and Innovation Research

Despite efforts across the nation, DSP workforce shortages persist, and the challenges involved in recruiting and retaining quality DSPs are complex. Stronger collaborations among interested parties, and brainstorming innovative ideas and approaches are key to future improvement.

On-Going Collaboration Among State, Provider Agencies, and DSPs

DSPs and provider agencies are well positioned to identify what is working, what is not working. State agencies supporting older adults, people with disabilities, and/or people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have hosted listening sessions and/or advisory committees that provide opportunities for provider agencies and DSPs to meet and speak with the state staff. These opportunities create direct avenues for agency administrators and DSPs to discuss workforce capacity, DSP support needs (including state-sponsored training needs), and quality improvement efforts. Tennessee established a [DSP Advisory Group](#) to inform policy and program changes and help support the work of DSPs. For states interested in developing a similar advisory group, CQL offers “[Steps to Implement a Similar Group.](#)”

Provider Innovation Grants

States may offer grant funding to providers or other interested parties to develop innovative methods for addressing the DSP workforce crisis. Indiana, through its ARPA Spending Plan, created the [Innovation Pilot Project Grants](#) to provide opportunity for home and community-based services providers, non-provider community entities, self-advocates, and families to explore innovative ideas related to the provision of HCBS, including supporting DSPs. The Vermont Medicaid program proposed (through its 1115 demonstration waiver) to enhance the quality, accessibility, and sustainability of HCBS by making [reimbursement-based grants](#) available to providers and community-based organizations, including workforce development grants that will focus on supporting HCBS providers with professional development, employee growth, and productivity.



Opportunities for Change and Further Considerations

Based on the above research findings, we have identified three potential opportunities for change to improve the recruitment and retention of quality DSPs in Utah. Opportunities that may be well-suited for implementation in Utah include (1) an awareness and outreach campaign targeted to culturally responsive and diverse workers, (2) establishing long-term career opportunities of DSPs, and (3) enhancing collaboration with DSPs and provider agencies. We plan to work with the Steering Committee and DHHS to help prioritize and select which opportunities to include for further exploration in our final report. Our recommendations may change as we collect more information on this and other research topics and explore their feasibility.

Implement An Awareness and Outreach Campaign Targeted to Culturally Responsive and Diverse Workers

The state should consider implementing an awareness and outreach campaign targeted to culturally responsive and diverse workers. When implementing any awareness and outreach campaign, it is important to first define a vision for DSP recruitment within the state. This vision statement should outline the state's long-term goals and aspirations for DSP recruitment in the future. In other words, what the state hopes to achieve in connection with future DSP recruitment efforts. Once a vision statement has been crafted, the state can collaborate with providers, people receiving services, and other community partners to develop an awareness and outreach campaign that meets its vision. As stated above, publicity can take the form of television/radio/print ads, public service announcements, posters, webpages, logo designs, stickers, and social media posts.

In our background research regarding the Utah workforce, we noted that Utah has a sizable community of immigrants, which are an important part of the state's labor force and support Utah's economy (American Immigration Council 2021). The state should consider implementing a multi-lingual, multi-cultural awareness and outreach campaign within the state of Utah. To further this initiative, the state could consider partnering with the [Utah Center for Immigration and Integration](#) to provide pathways for immigrant employees to become familiar with the DSP role and to engage with provider agencies to increase employment of immigrants.

Benefits of Opportunity

Outreach and awareness campaigns can publicize the importance of the direct support workforce, garner interest for working in the home and community-based services field, establish respect and recognition for workers in the field, and ultimately reduce workforce shortages. Targeting culturally responsive and diverse workers to fill DSP roles can increase access to supports for those receiving waiver services by integrating cultural and linguistic knowledge into supports.

Potential Barriers to Implementation

Implementation of this opportunity would require dedicated time from state LTSS subject matter experts, state communications staff and Center for Immigration and Integration staff (if the state elects to pursue a such a partnership). There will likely be costs and staff resources associated with adapting materials to make sure that they are culturally appropriate and meaningfully translated. The fiscal impact of an awareness and outreach campaign will vary depending on the size, complexity and duration of the campaign.

Impact on Utah LTSS Priorities and System

An awareness and outreach campaign targeted to culturally responsive and diverse workers would support Utah's efforts to promote the provision of high quality services and the engagement of highly qualified direct support professionals. Additionally, this opportunity would help address direct care staff shortages, expand service provider networks, and potentially increase access to services for multilingual and multicultural service recipients, as well as people living in rural areas.

Establish Long-Term Career Opportunities for DSPs

The state should consider establishing long-term career opportunities for DSPs, including creating pipeline program, enhancing training opportunities for advancement, and creating a career ladder.

Pipeline Program. In the most recent NCI survey, fewer Utah providers (compared to the national average) reported any engagement with high schools or local colleges/universities for recruitment purposes (35.2% vs. 44.5%) or engagement in apprenticeship programs (1.1% vs. 10.5%) (NCI-IDD 2023). The state should consider creating a high school training and internship program for DSPs providing home and community-based services. The state could partner with the Utah State Board of Education to expand its Career and Technical Education (CTE) Program by modifying its [Family and Human Services Pathway](#) to include HCBS training courses and internships related to providing services to older adults, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and individuals with complex medical needs. Competent high school HCBS training programs would likely encourage more providers to recruit at the high school level and result in more workers joining the profession.

Training Opportunities for Advancement. In a 2023 survey of DSPs in Utah, researchers from the University of Utah's Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice reported that DSPs "feel they are undertrained and are not provided with opportunities to further their qualifications, while inadequate funding dissuades employers from seeking training" (Cutler, Juhasz and Wappett 2023). Further, the researchers indicated that DSPs in Utah "are eager to learn and grow in their professional capacities" (Cutler, Juhasz and Wappett 2023). The state should consider funding additional opportunities for DSPs to learn and apply best practices and evidenced-based skills, which could lead to opportunities for advancement. One possibility for training comes from the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals' (NADSP). This online training platform – the [E-Badge Academy](#) – provides DSPs (anywhere in the state) with the opportunity to make a long-term commit to the profession by completing three progressive tiers of training. Additionally, if the state elects to target recruiting efforts to diverse workers (as recommended above), it should also consider translating existing training materials into multiple languages and consider new multi-lingual and multi-cultural training opportunities.



Career Ladder. The state should consider creating a career ladder—opportunities for career advancement with increased wages tied to level of training/education and experience. In combination with enhanced training opportunities a career ladder could reinforce DSP commitment to the profession. While not a requirement for career ladders, the state could also consider a partnership with Utah Department of Workforce Services to develop DSP registry using developed infrastructure. For reference, the [Utah Registry for Professional Development \(URPD\)](#) is home to Utah’s Early Childhood and Youth Workforce Registry. The URPD has created a 12-level career ladder that provides supportive coursework, a registry to track training hours and education, and a system of professional recognition for youth and early learning professionals across the state.

Benefits of Opportunity

Establishing a high school pipeline program would bring younger workers to the direct support workforce, while enhancing training opportunities may improve workers’ satisfaction, equip them to provide high-quality care and provide an opportunity to commit to the direct care profession. Creating a career ladder recognizes and compensates DSPs for improving education and remaining in the field, which in turn can reinforce commitment to the profession. According to the Medicaid and CHIP Payment and Access Commission Wisconsin “advertised the free training and testing offered for HCBS workers and received 9,000 new applicants for the training program” (MACPAC 2022, 7). Additionally, two of the opportunities discussed in this section suggest building on existing infrastructure developed by other state agencies, which may result in a “lighter lift” for implementation than would otherwise have been possible.

Potential Barriers to Implementation

While implementing this opportunity would place demands on staff time and resources, the primary barrier would likely be funding. The fiscal impact of implementing a pipeline program, enhancing training opportunities for advancement, and creating a career ladder could be substantial. However, the state could mitigate costs by implementing these recommendations in phases. Additionally, the state could potentially reduce its costs for these efforts through requests for grant funding or by obtaining federal financial participation through a §1115 demonstration waiver. It is important to note that even these mitigation efforts could bring related costs for time and resources to request and report on grants and §1115 waivers.

Impact on Utah LTSS Priorities and System

Establishing long-term career opportunities for DSPs would support Utah’s efforts to promote high quality services and the engagement of highly qualified direct support professionals. Additionally, this opportunity would help address direct care staff shortages, expand service provider networks, and potentially increase access to services for people living in rural areas.

Enhance Collaboration with DSPs & Provider Agencies

The state should consider enhancing collaboration with DSPs and provider agencies. Enhancement could be accomplished using one or both the following strategies. First, the state could host “Listening Sessions” to hear the voices of all DSPs and provider agencies. Meetings could be held in-person or virtually and occur on a monthly or quarterly interval. Second, the state could establish a DSP advisory group to inform policy, program changes, and elevate the voices of DSPs to a statewide level.



Benefits of Opportunity

As mentioned above, these opportunities create direct avenues for DSPs and agency administrators to discuss workforce concerns—what is working and what is not working. They also provide recognition to DSPs for their commitment and expertise in the field.

Potential Barriers to Implementation

Implementation of these opportunities would require dedicated time from DIH, DAAS, and DSPD staff to coordinate and host these listening sessions and advisory committee meetings. Additionally, DSPs, agency administrators, and other community partners would need to create capacity to participate in these meetings.

Impact on Utah LTSS Priorities and System

Establishing long-term career opportunities for DSPs would again support Utah's efforts to promote the provision of high quality services and the engagement of highly qualified direct support professionals.

Further Considerations

In addition to the barriers discussed above, HSRI recommends DHHS consider the following factors while evaluating the feasibility of the proposed opportunities:

1. Consider whether proposed changes have the impact of imposing stricter eligibility standards, reducing the amount duration or scope of services, or devising lower provider rates. Changes with such impacts may be interpreted as a violation of the Section 9817 maintenance of effort requirements under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) that would require the state to return ARPA funds to the federal government. This risk can be mitigated by ensuring proposed changes are not implemented prior to the state of Utah expending all funds attributed to the increased federal medical assistance percentage made available through that legislation.
2. Consider the level of buy-in from people receiving services, providers, advocacy organizations and policy makers. External champions and strong legislative advocacy will be crucial to making progress to address the DSP shortage in Utah. DHHS should continue to educate and provide regular information updates to interested parties and policy makers.
3. Consider the amount of time needed to complete Legislative and Regulatory Changes to effectuate proposed changes.
4. Finally, depending on which opportunities are sought, consider that DHHS might incur significant costs in supporting DSP workforce initiatives, especially in enacting initiatives that raise the wages of DSPs.

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Appendix A: Plain Language Summary

Brief 1: Hiring/Keeping Direct Support Professionals

Who is this brief for?

This brief is for people interested in learning about ways to hire and keep Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) at their workplace after they are hired.

What is this brief about?

In Utah, there are not enough DSPs to support people who use home and community-based services. There are many reasons why people are not becoming or don't want to continue working as a DSP. For example, people don't know jobs are available, they don't get enough training, the job is very demanding, and there aren't enough opportunities to get promoted.

What did researchers find out?

Researchers think that Utah could do three things to encourage people to become DSPs and keep doing DSP work: (1) Advertise and tell more people about what DSPs do, (2) set up a high school program to train new DSPs and offer more training to people after they become DSPs, and (3) establish a DSP Advisory Committee.

What is most important to know?

Utah needs to act now with the support of legislators, advocates, and community partners to encourage people to become and stay DSPs.

Where can I learn more about this?

You can learn more about this research by emailing HSRI Project Coordinator Jasmine Hepburn at jhepburn@hsri.org.

