

Shortage of Direct Support Professionals—A Growing Crisis in the Developmental Disabilities Community

The past two years have seen considerable challenges in the recruitment, retaining, and training of professionals supporting individuals with developmental disabilities. The value and neglect of qualified direct support professionals is receiving attention at the highest levels within the federal government. In a speech on September 24, 2002, the U.S. Secretary of Labor, Elaine Chao, observed, “The paraprofessional long-term care workforce...is the cornerstone of America’s long-term care system. Direct support workers...are critical to the success of the New Freedom Initiative” (President Bush’s effort to support the full implementation of the Supreme Court’s *Olmstead* decision). Secretary Chao also observed that, “The fundamental, long-term challenge is how to develop a committed, stable pool of workers who are willing, able and skilled to provide quality care.” (http://www.dol.gov/sec/media/speeches/20020924_ANCOR.htm). On the same day, a Concurrent Resolution was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives: “Expressing the sense of the Congress that community inclusion and enhanced lives for individuals with mental retardation or other developmental disabilities is at serious risk because of the crisis in recruiting and retaining direct support professionals, which impedes the availability of a stable, quality direct support workforce.” The resolution observed that “Whereas this workforce shortage is the most significant barrier to implementing the *Olmstead* decision and undermines the expansion of community integration as called for by the president’s New Freedom Initiative, placing the community support infrastructure at risk...It is the sense of the Congress that the Federal government and the States should make it a priority to ensure a stable, quality

direct support workforce for individuals with mental retardation and other developmental disabilities that advances our Nation's commitment to community integration for such individuals and to personal security for them and their families." While the 107th Congress adjourned before acting on the resolution, it will be reintroduced this year.

There are common threads in these observations by national leaders:

- Direct support professionals are essential to fulfilling the national promises of community living made to people with developmental disabilities as articulated in judicial decisions, such as *Supreme Court v. Olmstead*, the Administration's policy as outlined in the New Freedom Initiative, and in federal legislations such as the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act.
- There is a national crisis in securing an adequate supply of qualified direct support professionals, and the inability to recruit and retain qualified direct support workers threatens the fulfillment of the national promises made laws, and in judicial and regulatory interpretations of those laws.
- The crisis in recruitment and retention of sufficient number and quality of direct support personnel is directly linked to basic market conditions (e.g., actual and relative compensation, lack of long-term career opportunities etc.).

The tough situation that direct support professionals face can be traced to low salary, wages, and compensations. This is evident in both high turnover of these professionals (40%-70% in most state studies) and high rates of vacancies (6% to 14% in most state studies). Further, there is a correlation between turnover and vacancies (and, therefore, direct support staff compensation) and the quality of life of people with developmental disabilities.

The realities of the direct support professional workforce depicted above have been talked about for more than 25 years now. Most recently, between 2000 and 2002, at least 27 states undertook or funded formal analyses of wages of direct support personnel. Most found that private community agency wages for direct support professionals equal

three-quarters of those of state employees in the same roles and barely half (55%) of the state's average wage. In response, many states undertook modest to major efforts to increase community DSP compensation, the most major one coming from the state of Wyoming. In Wyoming, the state financed a substantial evaluation of the relative compensation of DSPs with other occupational groups. This information was used by the State Department of Health to advocate for and obtain from a 51% increase in compensation for DSPs beginning in July 2002 (read the Wyoming study online at <http://ddd.state.wy.us/>). A subsequent study showed that in only the first 3 months following the implementation of the increase, turnover rates had fallen by about one-third. In California, people with disabilities, state service providers, and state Regional Centers supported Federal Court complaint that the State has failed in its responsibility to assure that "payments [for services] are consistent with efficiency, economy and quality of care." The established payments, it is argued, are adequate to hire and retain staff sufficiently to provide an adequate level of "quality of care," an argument bolstered by the State Auditor's reporting that the system's "success has been undermined by insufficient state funding."

Only a year ago, things seemed to be getting better for direct support professionals and those who recognized and advocated for their fair compensation. However, the realities of state budget cuts of the past year have sunk in and have taken an adverse toll on developing the direct support workforce. With about two-thirds of service provider budgets typically going to pay staff, there is great concern that recently increased attention to increasing compensation for direct support professionals and recently won

victories in doing so, will be lost to the budget cut processes. As Don Carrick of Nodaway County Services, Missouri, points out, “With so many states in crisis, direct support advocates have had to shore up positions to keep funding where it is, rather than pushing forward. As one provider pointed out, it has resulted in several staff not receiving a raise for the third year and a number of office managers leaver for other jobs.” What had seemed like such a positive trend just a year ago in terms of recognizing the value of direct support workers and seeking compensation more in line with that value, seems in jeopardy. Perhaps in the commitment to protecting the well-being of people with developmental disabilities, and in the recognition that doing so is hardly separable from attending to the needs of direct support professionals, we need to find ways to become more efficient, to better use other community resources, to sustain the engagement families, and to use technology more effectively.

If we cannot find ways to protect and enhance the compensation of the direct support professional workforce during this period, we can expect an even higher turnover rate, more vacancies, and a significant decrease in the number and quality of people applying to be direct support workers. This will further result in reduced continuity and quality of support, limited growth in community services, and fewer choices for people with developmental disabilities.

By AAMR staff