Advancing Direct Support Professional (DSP) Careers: Start Here, Go Anywhere!

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LEAD Center

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National Disability Institute (NDI)

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Office of Disability Employment Policy

ODEP is the only non-regulatory Federal agency that promotes policies and coordinates with employers and all levels of government to increase workplace success for people with disabilities.

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Office of Disability Employment Policy

ODEP's mission is to develop and influence policies and practices that increase the number and quality of employment opportunities for people with disabilities, that meet the needs of America's employers.

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Welcome and Opening Remarks

Julie Hocker
Assistant Secretary
Office of Disability Employment Policy
U.S. Department of Labor

Today's Presenters

- **Leah Cadena-Igdalsky**, LEAD Center Subject Matter Expert, Social Policy Research Associates
- **Kris Palmer**, LEAD Center Subject Matter Expert, Social Policy Research Associates
- **Dr. Carol Britton Laws**, University of Georgia Institute on Human Development and Disabilities
- **Jack Teters,** New Jersey Department of Human Services

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Learning Objectives

Through this webinar, participants will:

- Understand the role of Direct Support Professionals (DSP) and how DSP work experience can lead to careers in workforce development, health care, education, social services, and other fields.
- Learn how to apply the new DSP Career Exploration infographic as a practical tool to guide job seekers interested in this profession.
- Hear lessons from the field on launching, sustaining, and scaling successful initiatives aimed at increasing DSP labor force.
- Learn how Registered Apprenticeship Programs are being used to expand and strengthen the DSP workforce.

Leah Cadena-Igdalsky

LEAD Center Subject Matter Expert, Social Policy Research Associates

Kris Palmer

LEAD Center Subject Matter Expert, Social Policy Research Associates

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Who are Direct Support Professionals (DSPs)?

DSPs help people with disabilities lead independent lives-- supporting community participation, social integration, decision-making, navigating education and work.

Work setting varies--could be a home or a business or other public spaces.

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Related but Distinct: DSPs are Part of the Broader Umbrella of Direct Care Jobs

- Home health aides/workers (HHAs)
- Certified nursing assistants (CNAs)
- Personal care attendants/aides (PCAs)
- Community Support Specialist

How to Scale Direct Care to Meet Growing Demand?

The direct care workforce is projected to add 772,000 new jobs—more than any other single occupation in the country.

Growth favors home and community-based settings verses long-term care.

Source: PHI National, Direct Care Workers in the United States: Key Facts, 2025

Unlocking Barriers that Inhibit DSP Workforce Expansion

- **Undervaluation**: DSP labor is often considered an entry-level job, not a professional career.
- **Low Compensation**: DSPs earn less than other fields with similar skill levels.
- **Lack of Career Path Clarity**: Limited knowledge of advancement options prevents DSPs from seeing the job as a career with growth potential.

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Tapping Opportunities for DSP Labor Supply Expansion

- **Expand DSP Apprenticeship:** Several states offer programs that benefit job seekers and employers including GA, KS, MO, NH, NY and TN.
- **Develop DSP Career Pathways:** DSP jobs are a launching point for healthcare, education, social services, rehabilitation sectors.

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Direct Support Professional Career Exploration

DSP Recruitment and Placement Aligns with Workforce Priorities

- Supports Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act business engagement and employer services outcomes.
- DSPs provide a base for pipelines to multiple in-demand, higher waged occupations in multiple sectors.
- Strengthens coordination between business services and job seeker services.
- Promotes cross-system collaboration to meet employer workforce needs.

Multiple Avenues for AJCs to support DSP Employers

- DSP Registered Apprenticeship development
- On-the-Job reimbursement
- Short-term or customized/incumbent worker training
- Tax credits, where applicable

Jack Teters

New Jersey Department of Human Services

Dr. Carol Britton Laws

University of Georgia Institute on Human Development and Disabilities

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NEW JERSEY HUMAN SERVICES

New Jersey Department of Human Services: Initiatives to Support the Direct Care Workforce

Jack Teters, Aging and Disability Services Policy Advisor

New Jersey Department of Human Services

- The Department of Human Services offers a broad range of services and supports to New Jersey residents, including food security programs, mental health and substance use disorder treatment, services for aging residents, and health insurance for over 2.2m New Jerseyans.
- The Department offers access to direct care services through a number of programs, including:
  - Jersey Assistance for Community Caregiving (JACC)
  - Personal Assistance Services Program (PASP)
  - NJ FamilyCare (Medicaid)/Personal Preference Program (PPP)
  - Community Care Program (CCP)/Supports Program (SP)
  - Community programs in the Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services

Direct Care Workforce Technical Assistance Project

- Comprehensive catalogue of State-led projects and initiatives to support the direct care workforce
- Direct Care Workforce Advisory Board
- Analysis of public data
- Direct Care Workforce Strategic Plan

Raise Awareness of Direct Care Jobs and Resources

- In 2023, DHS and the Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities launched "Jobs That Care New Jersey," a website designed to guide individuals interested in entering the direct care workforce.

- The website currently includes information on becoming a DSP, Certified Home Health Aides (CHHA), or ASL Deaf Language Associate.

Incentive Programs – Loan Redemption

- In 2024, DHS collaborated with the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and Higher Education Student Assistance Authority to launch the Home and Community Based Services Provider Loan Redemption Program.
- The program provided up to $50,000 in loan redemption for in-demand HCBS professionals in exchange for one year of service, including DCF care managers and mobile crisis workers working with individuals with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities (I/DD).
- 450 HCBS workers enrolled in the program and are set to complete their terms of service in March of 2026.

Incentive Programs – Home Health Aide

NJ Certified
Home Health Aide Career

TRAIN, INCENTIVIZE, AND EMPOWER CHHAs

- In 2025, DHS collaborated with Rutgers University to launch the Certified Home Health Aide Career Program.
- Through $2.8 million in federal funds, the program offered three pilots:
  - A scholarship program, connecting successful applicants with CHHA trainers in the state and paying for 76 hours of required training.
  - A mentoring program, which includes a 12-week, on the job mentoring component.
  - A specialized training program to provide current CHHAs with enhanced training on dementia care and mental health first aid, as well as monetary incentives for completion.

Career Pathway and Training Development

NADD Competency-Based IDD/MI Dual Diagnosis Direct Support Professional Certification Pilot

- Grant program to provider agencies providing $1,000 per eligible DSP employee.
- Funding covers compensation for employees as they complete the training, NADD membership costs, and training/certification costs.

Direct Support Professional Career Development Program

- Partnership between, New Jersey Association of community Providers, Office of the Secretary of Higher Education and New Jersey Community College Consortium.
- Supports certificate programs at Bergen Community College and Rowan College.
- Program includes stipends, in-depth training, and internships with local employers.

Career Pathway and Training Development, cont.

Growing Apprenticeships in Non-Traditional Sectors (GAINS)

- Funds the development of new and existing Registered Apprenticeship Programs in high-growth industries, including healthcare.
- Funding can be used to offset training costs and reimburse up to 50% of new apprentices' wages.
- Current apprenticeship programs include training for CHHAs, CNAs, and other direct support roles.

Continued Interagency Collaboration

IDD Provider Workforce:

Direct Support Professional (DSP) Certification Pilot Projects

Ashleigh Caseman, Director Office of Medicaid Coordination and Health Systems Innovation

Division of Strategy Technology and Performance

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DSP Certification Pilots Overview

The Department of Behavioral Health & Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) lead pilots for three pathways for DSPs to earn a competency-based certification that recognizes their knowledge and skill in supporting people with I/DD in community-based settings.

- Each pathway includes approximately 50 hours of competency-based online instruction through Relias or the College of Direct Support and an assessment that will lead to a DSP Entry-level credential (DSP-I) or higher.
- Certification is based on the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Core Competencies for Direct Support Workers.

DSP Certification Pilots Overview, cont.

- There was no cost to the DSP for participating in any of the pathways to certification.
- Each DSP who earned a DSP certification, regardless of pathway, received a one-time bonus/stipend.
  - DSP I Certification = $6,200 bonus ($5,000 after taxes)
  - DSP II Certification can earn an additional $1,240 bonus ($1,000 after taxes)
  - DSP III Certification can earn an additional $1,240 bonus ($1,000 after taxes)
- Each pilot sought to support 200 DSPs to earn a certification but expanded in 2025.

Competency- Based Certification - Overview

- Competencies that are built into workforce development strategies can improve workforce recruitment and retention.
  - The workforce must have the knowledge, skills, and compass to perform a wide array of tasks that support people with I/DD to be healthy, safe, valued, and engaged members of their communities.
  - DSPs are interdisciplinary professionals.

Competency- Based Certification - Overview, cont.

CMS Direct Service Worker Core Competency Set (2019)

1. Communication
2. Person-Centered Practices
3. Evaluation and Observation
4. Crisis Prevention and Intervention
5. Safety
6. Professionalism
8. Empowerment and Advocacy
9. Health and Wellness
10. Community Living Skills and Support
11. Community Participation and Networking
12. Education, Training, and Self-Development

Certified DSP Apprenticeship - River Edge

What:

Department of Labor Certified Direct Support Professional Apprenticeship program – Administered by River Edge Behavioral Health

How:

Every apprentice will complete 159 virtual training hours through Relias. An assigned mentor will be coupled with the apprentice at each provider agency to ensure that the learned skills are being used and will be required to sign off on the competencies achieved.

Who:

New hires and DSPs employed by provider agencies – Individuals must be registered as an apprentice and work a minimum of 2000 hours. Can be credited 1000 hours for experience. Completion leads to DSP III.

When:

The initial pilot operated from February 1, 2024 – January 31, 2025. Extended in 2025.

For more information please email: Greta O'Dell at DOLpilot@river-edge.org

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NADSP E-Badge Academy - United Cerebral Palsy

What:

National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals (NADSP) E-Badge Academy program - Administered by United Cerebral Palsy

Who:

DSPs who are currently employed by provider organizations. Providers identify local administrator for Webcourse works platform.

How:

DSP must complete 50 hours of online learning through Relias and apply the learning in practice. Testimonials/Work samples that reflect the DSP's knowledge, values, and skills are submitted for NADSP review and an e-badge is awarded. 15 e-badges are required to earn a DSP 1 certification.

When:

The UCP/E-Badge pilot supported 20 DSPs at 10 Provider Organizations (200 DSPs) from February 1, 2024 – to January 31, 2025. Expanded in 2025.

For more information please em
Diane Wilush at
UCPNADSP@ucpga.org

UCP United Cerebral Palsy™

DSP TAP - University of Georgia/IHDD

What:

Direct Support Professional Training and Assessment Program (DSP TAP) led by the Institute on Human Development and Disability (IHDD/UCEDD) at the University of Georgia

How:

Learners must complete self-paced online competency-based training (approximately 50 hours) and take a 100 item exam that is proctored remotely online. Exam is developed to meet NCCA Accreditation Standards.

Who:

This online credentialing option is open to learners who are already employed by support providers, those in self-direction, or those who are interested in working with adults with I/DD.

When:

Learners enrolled in online courses in Spring and Fall 2024. DSP I exam was delivered in August 24 and January 25. DSP II courses were offered in Spring 2025, and the exam was administered in June 2025.

For more information please email: Dr. Carol Britton Laws at DSPWorkforce@uga.edu

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DSP Certification Pilots Outcomes as of June 30, 2025

Pilot Project	DSP I	DSP II	DSP III	Total People	Total Certificates
E-Badge	194	124	78	**194**	396 certificates awarded
DSP TAP	426	260	N/A	**426**	686 certificates awarded
DOL Apprenticeship	273	273	269	273 met requirements for a certification level; of those, **269** achieved Apprentice	815 certification level requirements met; 269 certificates awarded
Total	893	657	347	**893** met requirements for a certification level; of those, 889 received a certificate [4 DOL met requirements at Entry and/or Emerging Levels]	1,897 certification level requirements met; **1,351** certificates awarded

DSP Certification Pilots External Evaluation

- Organizational satisfaction – 100% across pilots
- DSP satisfaction – 87% (Ebadge), 90% (DOL), 98% (DSP TAP)
- DSP Intent to stay in field 6+ years – 82% (Ebadge), 78% (DOL), 81% (DSP TAP)
- DSP better equipped to provide high quality supports - 98% - 100% across pilots

Questions?

LEAD WIOA Technical Assistance (TA) Center

- The **National Center on Leadership for the Employment and Economic Advancement of People with Disabilities (LEAD)** is a Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) TA center, grant funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy, U.S. Department of Labor.
- The LEAD Center helps states, workforce development professionals, and American Job Centers (AJC) implement WIOA, in service to Americans with disabilities.
- Through its resources, tools and TA, the LEAD Center:
    - increases career pathways and economic self-sufficiency for people with disabilities;
    - ensures employers have the skilled workers they need to compete in the global economy; and
    - improves disability data reporting by WIOA programs.

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Does your team effectively serve people with disabilities? Technical Assistance (TA) That Drives Results

State workforce agencies, American Job Center (AJC) teams, and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) partners are invited to apply.

All targeted and intensive TA engagements begin with a formal request and signed agreement.

Email the LEAD TA team to learn more at:

info@leadcenter.org

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