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

December 16, 2025

Webinar Transcript

>> Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to today's webinar, Advancing Direct Support Professional Careers: Start Here, Go Anywhere! Next slide, please. My name is Sarah Loizeaux. I am a Subject Matter Expert on Career Pathways with the LEAD Center and part of National Disability Institute. And I will also be your facilitator for today. Next slide, please. We want to assure, ensure that everyone today can fully participate in our webinar. So, I just want to take a few moments to share some captioning and housekeeping tips. Today's webinar is live captioned. And the captions, they are below the slide deck. You also have the option to open the captioning webpage in a new browser. And the links have been posted in the chat box, or will be momentarily. Once captioning windows open on your own system, you can adjust the background color, the text color, and the fonts, using the drop down menus at the top of the browser window. We suggest you position the window to sit right on top of the embedded captioning to allow you to see the screen itself. Today's webinar is being recorded, and the archive and supporting materials will be placed on the LEAD Center website under recent and upcoming events within 10 business days. Next slide, please. We love questions. And I highly encourage you to ask any that you may have about any of the content that's being covered today. At any point, you can click the Q&A button that's located on the webinar's menu bar. And this will bring up a Q&A panel or a window into which you can type any of your questions for our presenters. We will hold time for questions and answers toward the end of today's presentation. And at any time, if you are experiencing any technical issues, or have questions for the technical support team, please let us know in the chat box below. Next slide, please. The LEAD Center is funded through the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy. And I would like to thank them today for their leadership and support to make today's webinar happen. The Office of Disability Employment Policy, also known as ODEP, is a subcabinet level agency within the U.S. Department of Labor. 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. Next slide, please. The mission of ODEP 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. Next slide, please. And with that said, it is now my distinct pleasure to introduce to you Assistant Secretary for Disability Employment Policy, Julie Hocker. We are thrilled and honored to have her here today to provide our opening remarks. Assistant Secretary Hocker has an impressive record of leadership in disability policy, workforce development, and public private collaboration to increase the community participation, including competitive integrated employment of Americans with disabilities. From 2018 to 2021, she served as U.S. Commissioner on Disabilities at the Department of Health and Human Services. In that role, she led the Administration on Disabilities, directing national policy and programs for independent living, intellectual and developmental disabilities, assistive technology, and traumatic brain injuries. As commissioner, she launched the National Disability Employment Technical Assistance Center and created the first federal prize competition to drive innovation in talent pipeline programs for workers with disabilities. She also worked with the Rehabilitation Services Administration to establish the Pathways to Partnership program. This demonstration project enabled the states to align independent living, special education, and vocational rehabilitation systems, streamlining transition planning for youth, as they prepare to move from high school into higher education, job training, and work. In the private sector, Assistant Secretary Hocker built her career as an innovator and leader. She managed global investment and risk management team at Vanguard. And, later, served as Director of Public Health at Guidehouse, where she became nationally recognized for advancing innovation at the state and federal levels for rare diseases and disability policy innovation. She worked with members of Congress on legislation that strengthened able accounts for Americans with disabilities, and created clear pathways to economic self sufficiency. She also facilitated national leadership training for state vocational rehabilitation and developmental disability directors, self advocates, and families, equipping leaders with the tools to drive innovation, accountability, and results in their programs and communities. She has earned her bachelor's degree from St. Mary's College of Maryland, and her MBA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Assistant Secretary Hocker has been a long time champion of the dignity of work and the value that every American with a disability brings to their families and communities. Please welcome me in joining her. Thank you, Assistant Secretary Hocker.

>> Well, thank you, Sarah. And good afternoon to all of you, all across the country. I am delighted and honored to join with you today on behalf of the Office of Disability Employment Policy. I am thrilled that I recently joined the ODEP team that has already earned a reputation for excellence in achieving results for Americans with disabilities. I personally bring to this role my conviction and a focus on clarity and measurable results. President Trump and Secretary Chavez DeRemer have made clear that they are committed

to unleashing the full potential of the American workforce, a vision that the administration has laid out in America's talent strategy, equipping American workers for the golden age. This talent strategy shares a bold vision and concrete ideas. It lays out five key strategic pillars for transforming the federal government's approach to workforce development. I want to highlight today just one of those pillars, which is focused on worker mobility. What is particularly relevant to our topic today, the worker mobility pillar calls for, to bring more Americans into the labor force by identifying the skills and the credentials needed for in demand jobs. Then providing the supports for people needed to gain those skills and credentials so that they succeed every day in those roles. This is precisely how we advance careers for direct service professionals, or DSPs. Every day across our nation, DSPs are changing lives. They help people with disabilities to build skills in independent living, community participation, and competitive integrated employment. DSPs are essential to the American workforce and to a thriving economy in which everyone has the opportunity to work hard, achieve financial stability, and pursue their dreams. Understanding that employment is the backbone of community living, and understanding that DSPs are at the heart of successful employment for Americans with disabilities, that's what brings us here today. There is a critical shortage of DSPs all across our nation. According to a report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics last year, jobs in direct care work, which include people who provide community based care, including DSPs, are estimated to grow by 26% by 2033. That far outpieces the 4% job growth projected for the nation overall. In today's webinar, we'll explore some creative ideas for filling those much needed jobs. We'll talk about workable solutions to the challenges of recruiting and retaining qualified DSPs. We'll show you how the DSP career exploration infographic, which is a grand new resource from the LEAD Center, that workforce professionals can use to help job seekers envision the multiple career paths and opportunities for advancement available to all of them through DSP work. Before I conclude, I also want to give a special thanks to our panelists from Georgia and New Jersey for sharing with us today the innovative work that they are doing in their states to incentivize and support DSP workers. I want to thank the LEAD Center for hosting this webinar. And for each of you being here today. Back to you, Sarah.

>> Thank you so much, Assistant Secretary Hocker. We can move to the next slide, please. Today, we have a full set of panel presenters; Leah Cadena Igdalsky, who is part of the LEAD Center as a subject matter expert, and is the Social Policy Research Associates. She will be presenting along with Kris Palmer, also a LEAD Center subject matter expert with Social Policy Research Associates. We are also joined today by guest presenters Dr. Carol Britton Laws of the University of Georgia's Institute on Human Development and Disabilities. And Jack Teters with the New Jersey Department of Human Services. Next slide, please. By the end of today's webinar, I really hope that we have a clear picture of the important role direct

support professionals play, and how their experience can open doors to careers in fields such as healthcare, education, and social services, among others. We'll walk through, as Secretary Hocker alluded to, our brand new Direct Support Professionals Career Exploration infographic. We hope you find it to be a valuable resource and practical tool for job seekers and workforce professionals alike. In addition, you'll hear from our guest presenters Dr. Carol Britton Laws and Jack Teters, who will share their expertise and field experience on what it takes to launch and sustain successful direct support professional initiatives, including Registered Apprenticeship Programs being used to strengthen and expand the DSP workforce. And with all of that said, let's get started. It is my pleasure to now introduce to you Leah Cadena Igdalsky and Kris Palmer, subject matter experts with the LEAD Center with Social Policy Research Associates. Leah, Kris, the floor is yours.

>> Thank you, Sarah. Next slide, please. There we are. Next slide. Thank you. So, I'm going to start with some level setting. Many of you know what a direct support professional is. But we'll review. They are essential workers who support people with disabilities to live independent lives and live independently. They help people navigate work or college, manage daily tasks, often serving as coaches, mentors, coordinators. By way of example, if you look here on the slide in the photograph to the left, these are people that have worked with LEAD Center before in helping us learn about DSPs. The person on the picture on the left, Russell, is a communications and strategic partnerships manager. And he has a disability. Next to him is Alethia, who is a DSP. And she supports Russell to be able to work, to get ready in the morning before work, to make sure his assistive technologies are set up and ready. So, that's just one example. There are many different kinds of tasks and other things DSPs do. But the general umbrella description is that they help people with disabilities live independent lives. They can work in many different settings from people's homes to group homes, to nursing home, to assisted living in school sites or on site place of employment. Next slide. So, this, DSPs are part of an umbrella of direct care workers. But they are distinct. They have overlapping responsibilities that home health aid may have, or a certified nursing assistant, and other types of direct care workers. But the important distinction to keep in mind is that they specifically support people with disabilities to be independent, to work, to go to school, or to be part of their broader community. Next slide. So, this is, as the assistant secretary said, there is a growing demand for direct, for direct care workers, and direct support professionals. In fact, it's the fastest growing occupation in the country. So, and especially in the in home community settings part, that's the fastest growing segment of the occupation. Next slide, please. So, what is getting in the way? Why can't we meet the demand here for this, for DSPs? One thing is that DSP labor is undervalued. Some, some people, or job seekers, may see DSP work as something that doesn't have growth, that there isn't growth potential, that there's not a career ladder,

which we'll be talking more about, that you'll see there is, there are many ladders. Low compensation, low wages is another deterrent for DSP work, for the same skills they can actually often find higher waged entry level jobs. And it's hard work. Another piece of this unlocking barriers is the lack of career path clarity. So, workers, and people, and really the public at large, sometimes even in our own workforce system, may not have the full knowledge about DSPs as a profession, and where it can lead. Next slide. So, states and employers are taking action across the country. We have, we'll hear some, from two fantastic speakers today to talk about what their states are doing. I'll mention a couple other things, actions that are being taken across the country. So, expanding the DSP apprenticeship is one strategy that attracts new recruits, that allow DSPs to earn a wage while they're getting training, and build new, in building their new skills. And just as importantly, they help workers gain the confidence as they move through what can be a steep learning curve for people new to the field. Apprenticeship is also being used to support current workers and upskill current workers. So, training, it not only improves the quality of support, obviously, given to people with disabilities, but it is also being shown to increase job satisfaction and improve retention. So, yeah, and then the DSPs are also, states are also developing DSP career pathways, so that it's not a dead end job, that there are many other places that go, to CSPs can be a launching point to careers, and industries like healthcare, education, and so are others. And informing workers is what we'll find forming workers and job seekers about a DSP job and the career ladders from that is really a way to attract and retain workers. So, to illustrate this, Leah is going to introduce us to this fantastic new DSP infographic that highlights the many possible career paths that are available. Next slide. Welcome, Leah.

>> Thank you so much, Kris. So, we set out to create a resource that could be useful for the various entities that interact with job seekers who might be interested in DSP careers. So, we thought about states, organizations, and employers who all have an interest in supporting the recruitment of DSPs, workforce awareness, and career advancement for direct support professionals. So, our hope is that is this tool will enable state and local workforce systems to build interest in the field, clarify those career progression opportunities that Kris referenced, and to improve the coordination between our workforce development, education, and human services systems. So, I can imagine that some folks might be starting to explore the tool for themselves using the link in the chat, which is great. So, I'm going to provide a few insights into what's contained in this tool and how you might use it in your own context. First, you'll see that the DSP role is in the center of this infographic, which has four quadrants; education, clinical healthcare, employment, and rehabilitation support, and community and social services. And these are four of the key sectors for which DSPs build a strong foundation and relevant skills to consider pursuing

additional training and continuing to build their careers. And within each of those four quadrants, you'll notice that each profession is coded by color and a certain number of graduation cap icons. And what that's showing is the level of education that's typically required for the role. You might also notice that careers are plotted on these concentric circles branching out from DSP in the center. And those circles represent the median salary for each of those jobs. So, I just want to note that what you see here about the average education requirements and the median salary is all based on national numbers. So, that might differ slightly in your local context and community. Another thing that I want to point out is that each of those career circles that you see on the infographic also include a link to a page that describes each of those professions on my next move. So, I would encourage you, as you're enjoying exploring this tool, to click through all of those links to learn about these various related professions. And, of course, as has been referenced a few times, this is a really new tool that we're very excited about, so we look forward to hearing from folks on today's webinar about the ways that you're using it in your local community, and also if you have questions or needs for assistance in using it within your context. And we'd love to connect with you. Next slide, please. So, we hope that that DSP career exploration infographic we just shared will be useful to the workforce system in supporting job seekers. And through our work, we've had the opportunity to connect with many providers, and we've heard that there are many provider agencies out there that are struggling to maintain consistent staffing levels of DSPs. But they might not be sure what exactly to do about it. Many providers feel alone in this continual, continuous struggle to recruit and retain DSPs. And they might not consider the role that the workforce system can play in supporting them to address these issues. But, in fact, there is a critical role for the workforce system to play. And specifically there's a role for American job centers, or AJCs. AJCs go by different names in different parts of the country. They're sometimes called a one stop center, but the title might vary in your state. But whatever they're called in your local area, AJCs are the core delivery system for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, which you'll often hear called WIOA, or W I O A. And WIOA is a federal law which is designed to help job seekers to access training, education, and support to find jobs, and to help employers to find the skilled workers that they need to fill critical roles. Local areas have the ability to target occupations to be prioritized for placement based on jobs that display high demand and have shown strong growth in their local area. As illustrated in the career exploration tool and our discussion today, DSPs are certainly in high demand, and work as a DSP builds the foundation for multiple professions. So, in fact, there are ripe opportunities for workforce systems to collaborate with disability and human services systems within their region or state. Next slide, please. So, before we get to our state speakers who we're all so excited to hear from, we just wanted to share a few of those opportunities for the workforce system, and specifically American job centers, to support both DSPs and DSP employers. First is

the role for AJCs to connect job seekers with registered apprenticeships, which combine paid on the job training with related technical classroom instruction to develop highly skilled workers, resulting in a nationally recognized credential upon completion of the apprenticeship. And you're going to hear about one example of a registered apprenticeship for DSPs in just a few moments. AJC staff can also support employers to develop customized on the job training, also known as OJT, for potential DSP workers. And, of course, at their core, AJCs play a critical role in connecting Americans who have consistently faced barriers to employment with employers, and then supporting employers to access federal tax credits, where relevant, such as the work opportunity tax credit. So, those are just a few of the ways that AJCs can support DSP employers. And we know that to address the persistent challenges of DSP recruitment and retention, it takes deep and meaningful collaboration across multiple agencies. Next slide, please. So, with that foundation set, I am thrilled to introduce our two state speakers today. First up, we will hear from Jack Teters, who is the Aging and Disability Services Policy Advisor for the New Jersey Department of Human Services, where he supports policy development and implementation in the Divisions of Aging, Disability Services, Developmental Disabilities, and Deaf and Hard of Hearing, as well as the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Prior to his work in the Department of Human Services, Jack worked for the Office of Governor Phil Murphy as a policy analyst, and worked in the nonprofit sector, designing and supervising employment and college readiness programs for youth. Jack earned his MA in public policy from Rutgers, and his BA in psychology from Drew University. After Jack, we will hear from Dr. Carol Britton Laws, who is a clinical professor and director of instruction for the Institute on Human Development and Disability, where she leads the University of Georgia's Disability Studies Certificate Program. She is the founding director of the Direct Support Professional Training and Assessment Program, which is the first standardized exam based credential for DSPs in the country. Prior, she chaired the National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals, Accreditation, and Credentialing Work Group, where she led the development of accreditation processes for educational programs for DSPs. She serves on the National Advisory Board for the College of Direct Support, and also serves as Director at Large for the Board of the American Association for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. She earned her doctorate in social work from UGA, and her MSW from Rutgers University. And with that, I will hand it over to Jack.

>> Thank you, Leah. And hello, everyone. And thank you all for attending today's webinar. I'm really excited to talk to you about some of the work that we've been doing in New Jersey to not only empower direct support professionals, but also help transform DSP work and the work of other direct care roles from being seen only as a job, to being seen as a long term career. So, New Jersey's taken many steps to support DSPs over the last several years.

And we're proud to say that we've recently completed our direct care workforce strategic plan, meaning that we've been giving this particular issue a lot of thought throughout the process of this plan's development. Today, I'm excited to share some of the lessons we've learned throughout the process of developing the strategic plan, and highlight some initiatives we've launched that can either help DSPs or be adapted to support this workforce in the future. Next slide, please. Firstly, just to provide a quick overview of what we do at the Department of Human Services in New Jersey, DHS 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 residents with disabilities, and health insurance for over 2.2 million New Jerseyans. We also offer direct care services specifically through a number of programs, including programs like our Jersey Assistance for Community Caregiving, and our Personal Assistant Services Program, which both offer access to personal care assistance for older adults, and individuals with physical disabilities. We also have our community care and supports programs, both waiver programs within our Division of Developmental Disabilities, that help individuals with developmental disabilities access direct support services, group homes, and more. These examples really only scratch the surface of what we do at DHS, and we rely heavily on direct care workers to operate these and other crucial programs throughout our department. Next slide, please. So, as I mentioned earlier, DHS has also been working on a direct care workforce strategic plan as part of our participation in a technical assistance project, with the Direct Care Workforce Strategy Center. As of last week, this plan is now available. And I'll make sure that that is shared with today's attendees. This project really helped us, as a state, catalog our different efforts to support direct care workers, and chart a course for how we can improve those initiatives and create new ones moving forward. The process of creating this plan also taught us much about the successes and challenges of creating initiatives that support care workers. And I wanted to touch on a few pillars of our overall strategy in my presentation today. Next slide, please. The first thing that we realized as part of this process is that we already have a significant number of programs available to support direct support professionals and other care workers in the state. But our care workers, and in many cases our own state agencies, were not aware of these supports or basic information on how to enter the field of becoming a direct care worker, or how to find DSP jobs. To combat this, we established the Jobs That Care website in New Jersey, a collaboration with the Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities. This website is designed to guide individuals interested in becoming a direct care worker, and entering the workforce, and includes details about direct support work, how to obtain training, and how to connect with meaningful employment. We coupled this website with an advertising campaign, reaching millions in the state, and throughout our work in the strategic plan, we are also endeavoring to expand the site with new direct care careers and information on

support programs available to workers, like loan redemption programs and job search tools. So, support programs and initiatives will have minimal impact on workers if they're not aware of them. And so we consider information sharing and awareness raising a key part of our overall strategy to build the direct care workforce. Next slide, please. Another key pillar of our strategy in New Jersey is the development of incentive programs to aid with both recruitment and retention. So, while we have many of these operating, I wanted to spotlight just a couple today. The first is our Home and Community Based Services Loan Redemption Program, which is designed to help retain workers by offering $50,000 of loan redemption to workers in key field, including mobile crisis workers that respond to children with behavioral health difficulties, and workers employed by our Division of Developmental Disabilities. Loans in this program are tied to a year of service, serving our retention goals. And we reached over 450 home and community based services through this program. This, one thing I want to point out about this program that's important is that although it is aimed at people who have a higher degree. It was open to a lot of different workers, even if they did not have a degree requirement. And this is often something that can encourage people to pursue more education in their career, and to advance their career through additional credentials and training. Next slide, please. Secondly, aimed more explicitly at direct care, we established a CHHA Career Program, which provides scholarships for people to undergo CHHA training, mentoring opportunities, and specialized training for existing CHHAs that want to further skills in areas like mental health, first aid, or dementia care. We've seen very high engagement and interest in these programs, underlining the importance of incentive programs in keeping and recruiting workers. And we hope to adapt these successful models to other direct paraprofessions, including DSPs. Next slide, please. The third pillar I'll discuss today is our effort to expand career pathways and trainings for direct care workers. Direct care workers, as mentioned before, often see their roles as jobs and not careers, deterring them from staying in the field, as they see no avenue to learn new skills or advance to new positions. DSPs don't have a uniform credential recognized nationally or at our state in New Jersey, and so they're particularly vulnerable here, which is why we targeted them with multiple programs, upscaling in New Jersey. So, for example, earlier this year, we release grants to DDD provider agencies to cover the cost of training DSPs to earn their NADD certification, a certification for individuals with a dual diagnosis of IDD and a mental illness, and through our Office of the Secretary of Higher Education. We also worked with our community college consortium to create a career development program for DSPs, which included stipends, in depth training, and internships with local employers, offered through select community colleges, creating a pathway to continued learning in higher education. Next slide, please. And our Department of Labor has also established the GAINS Program, providing apprenticeship funding to non traditional sectors, which includes funding to offset training costs and

apprentice wages. Current apprenticeship programs in that GAINS Program include training for CHHAs and CNAs, and we're exploring options to expand into other direct care roles, including direct support professionals. Incentives are a great way to recruit new workers. But if we want DSPs and other care workers to remain in the field, it's really essential that we make it clear that direct care can be a career where workers can continue to grow and advance. Next slide, please. And finally, I really think it's important to mention that beyond any one program or initiative, perhaps our most important pillar is our engagement across our state agencies. As part of the process of developing our direct care workforce strategic plan, we collaborated with seven other agencies, recognizing that without considering the full spectrum of factors influencing direct care workers, we cannot come up with a truly comprehensive solution. We often think of these professions as belonging to the worlds of health or human services exclusively, but education, workforce development, and licensing all play important roles. And we needed agencies covering all of these issues to fully develop our plan, which is why we included partners from higher education, like our Higher Education Student Assistance Authority, our Division of Consumer Affairs to cover issues like licensing, as well, of course, as our Department of Labor, who really tackles the workforce and workforce development holistically. Our collaboration is really what brought our efforts together on the strategic plan. And now that we, as agencies, all have a better understanding of our roles in the space, we feel a lot more well equipped to continue these collaborations into the future. So, with that, I think I'll hand it back to Leah. I want to thank everybody for having me here today and look forward to answering your questions and hearing your thoughts.

>> Thank you so much, Jack. And up next, I will turn it over to Carol.

>> Wonderful. Thank you so much. And thank you for having me today. I'm Carol Britton Laws, and I'm here to represent our Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, as well as the Institute on Human Development and Disability, which is the university center for excellence at the University of Georgia. And similar to the projects we just heard from, in New Jersey, ours was a partnership between our DD agency, the USAID at UGA, and a number of support provider organizations, as well as other stakeholders in the workforce development space. I'd like to first acknowledge Ashleigh Caseman, our Director of the Office of Medicaid Coordination and Health Systems Innovation at DBHDD for her ongoing support and commitment to these projects. She was instrumental in helping us to launch our three pilots that we will talk about in just a moment. And I'd also like to point out that the work that we started in Georgia on these three pilots that you'll hear about really started back in 2022. So, we spent a number of years in a study committee that was informed by a Senate resolution to examine the issues that existed within our direct support workforce, and to come up with solutions that were

specific to home and community based services for adults with intellectual disabilities. This yielded a workforce work group that began convening in 2022 to inform state initiatives. And with the rollout of the ARPA, or American Rescue Plan Spend Act, we were able to then institute some of those initiatives and fund them through our ARPA spend plan, which began in 2023 and just wrapped up in October of 2025. Next slide. Thank you. So, to provide you with a bit of an overview, we decided, with the collaboration of our Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, to highlight three separate distinct but yet related competency based certification pathways to assess knowledge and skill in our direct support workforce that support adults with IDD in community based settings. The need for three pathways was informed by the national core indicators, state of the workforce survey, that indicated that Georgia was lagging behind national averages in terms of DSP retention and high vacancy rates. And we selected three pilot pathways by three different factors. The first was our provider network in Georgia had already begun using the NADSP E Badge Academy, which is a certificate program that is provider driven and internally administered to incumbent staff. So, we wanted to recognize the work that had already gone in there. Our Department of Labor, as we heard earlier, was interested also in the DSP apprenticeship model that had been newly designed and nationally improved. And they were interested in piloting that as well for new hires, as well as rewarding seasoned staff who became mentors in the Department of Labor apprenticeship model. And we have also experienced a growth of participant direction during the COVID pandemic, as many states did. And we wanted to create a certification opportunity that stood outside of that provider system and would be important for increasing equity across employers, and for families who are employing staff in participant or self direction to offer them equal credentialing opportunities. We did a crosswalk, comparing the identified competencies that were needed for direct support professionals at the entry emerging and advanced levels of DSP work across all three pilots. And we looked at curricula through the College of Direct Support, which is a product of Elsevier and DirectCourse. And the Relias platforms to identify curriculum and content that were able to be tiered to meet these competency bases. So, for each of our pathways, we landed at about 50 hours of competency based online instruction to achieve a direct support professional entry level credential or higher. All of our credentials were also based on the Center for Medicaid and Medicare Services, CMS, Core Competencies for Direct Support Workers. Next slide. As it relates to our pilots, we also had a number of similarities in terms of the number of DSPs we were initially planning to support. There was no cost for any DSP to participate in any of the pathways to certification. And for those who earned a certification, regardless of the pathway, they were given a one time bonus or stipend. You can tell that the numbers of our stipends were fairly significant. For the completion of a DSP I certification, the DSP received a $6,200 bonus so that it would equate to about $5,000 after taxes. We're moving

forward in the career path pipeline and earning a DSP II. They earned an additional $1,240, or what would equate to about another $1,000 after taxes. And for a DSP III, again, another $1,240 bonus was provided. All of the bonuses were provided through a fiscal intermediary that went directly to the DSP, not to their employer. And we received amazing feedback from DSPs about how this bonus structure really changed their life and helped them to think about themselves as professionals and move forward in their careers. Each of our pilots sought to support 200 DSPs initially, but expanded significantly in 2025. And I'm happy to share with you our final numbers shortly. Next slide, please. So, I mentioned competencies and competency based certification as being important for all three of our pilot pathways. Competencies, we know, have been researched and are built into workforce development strategies that can improve recruitment and retention of DSPs in this space. The workforce can then be tested against these competency areas for the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they need to support a wide array of people with intellectual and disabilities to be engaged in their communities. And to support them across service settings, whether they are residential supports or employment focused supports, we recognize that DSPs are interdisciplinary professionals. They are teachers, they are coaches, they are often administrators of medication. They are job supports. So, just as we saw in the infographic that was shared earlier, the career of being a direct support professional can prepare you to move into multiple segments of health and human service work. Next slide. We used, for all three pilots, the Center for Medicaid Services Direct Service Worker Core Competency Set. And this competency set is a national framework that was used and developed in 2014, was recently revalidated in 2019, to standardize skills for workers in long term care, for them to focus on person centered support, health, safety, communication, and professionalism, that could help us to guide training and promote quality care to vulnerable populations like people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The CMS competencies are needed at each level. And that research was identified by the Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota, and was shared with us and other states who are interested in building the direct support professional career pathways through their Workforce Solutions Credentialing and Career Ladders Toolkit. And so we used this toolkit to identify which of these specific competency areas are needed at the entry, emerging, and advanced levels of a direct support career path, and what the tenure and definitions needed to be at each level so that we knew as we move through these pilot pathways, they would be consistent across each level, regardless of pathway. So, for example, for a direct support professional at the entry level, they would require about 50 hours of online training in the areas of crisis prevention, safety, person centered practices, and health and wellness. And perhaps some in some of the other of the 12 competency areas that you see on your screen as well. As an emerging professional, they may have been in their position for a year or two years. They

may need additional training specific to the skills and areas of community living skills and supports, communication, community inclusion and networking, and professionalism and ethics. At the DSP III level, they may require additional training of about 30 hours. And they may specify content specifically around empowerment and advocacy, evaluation and observation, cultural competence, and education training and self development. Next slide, please. Now, what I'd like to point out is while there were a lot of similarities across all three of our pathways, our assessment methods were very different. We did create a direct support professional apprenticeship opportunity, which was led by a community service board provider organization in Georgia called River Edge Behavioral Health. And we were informed by this, of this opportunity by registered apprenticeships that were created in Missouri and Arkansas, I believe. So, having received some consultation on how to launch a direct support professional apprenticeship, our provider agencies who are interested in supporting employees to move through the DOL, apprenticeship had to register with our state Department of Labor and DBHDD. They agreed to identify training and support, a mentor for each apprentice who was brought in to the DOL apprentice opportunity. They paid the apprentice a minimum of $10 per hour, although most did opt to pay significantly more than that. They were able to earn a credit for prior experience up to 1,000 hours. So, if a new hire or a DSP had come from a prior employer or had worked in the organization for a significant amount of time, but not maybe enough time to be considered a seasoned employee. They could get credit; up to 1,000 hours for that experience. And mentors were given a stipend of $2,000 when the apprentice completed the program in order to incentivize them to become an apprentice and support their mentee. Each apprentice completed 159 virtual training hours through a platform called Relias, was assigned a mentor who helped them apply the learning on the job, and then document their skills in order to sign off using a competency based checklist that the mentor would document where they observed the skill on the job, which was then signed off by the apprentice as well. And the skill statements on this checklist reflected the CMS direct support workforce competency areas. Next slide, please. The second pathway that we piloted was led by United Cerebral Palsy of Georgia. And it's the National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals E Badge Academy. Through the E Badge Academy, direct support professionals who are incumbent workers are, commit to 50 hours of online training, which could have been through the Relias platform or the College of Direct Support. And they submit testimonials or work samples to NADSP to determine that their knowledge and values and skills are, indeed, sufficient to be recognized with an e badge. Training is provided by NADSP's accredited programs. And the electronic badges that are earned are for the hours of education. So, in this case, 50 hours. The time spent in the curriculum and the competency area that focuses on those knowledge, skills, and values. The testimonials are evaluated by NADSP change reviewers to determine if the testimonial or the statement,

which could be written or recorded, is is sufficient to provide an example of the skill and the NADSP code of ethics that is reflected within that work sample. To earn a DSP I, 15 e badges must be earned. This includes the code of ethics e badge, 50 hours of training badge, and at least one from four entry level competency areas. These employers who support their staff to move through the NADSP E Badge Academy subscribe to a platform called Web Courseworks, where the electronic e badges are stored, and the DSP will be provided with an electronic transcript. Next slide, please. The final pilot pathway that we piloted was the new innovation, the new kid in town for DSP assessment, which I led the development for. It was informed by the Institute on Credentialing Excellence and the National Commission on Certifying Agencies Accreditation Standards. It was a credentialing program that was informed by the need for credentialing programs to help advance education and workforce skills to be able to effectively measure competence, knowledge, skills and attitudes with fidelity across service settings to protect the public so that the public has competence that harm will be prevented and staff are qualified for the job prior to hire to allow for professional development to assess the validity and the reliability of the skills that the person has. And for goodness of fit prior to hire. Ours is an exam based certification option for employees who are already working in the field, regardless of employer, those who are in self direction or participant direction, and also for those who are interested in working in the field. It's designed to reflect the direct support workforce competencies, and the direct support professional toolkit job descriptions. We met with state and national subject matter experts who were convened to write items to validate the exam and to set the cut score. The cut score represents what number of points someone needs to earn on the exam in order to be considered minimally qualified for the job. And in glancing through the list of attendees, I see a number of our national subject matter experts on this call. So, thank you so much for your support. Items were weighted by an exam blueprint, which was informed by how frequently a skill was needed on the job, and how critical it was to prevent harm. People receiving support and provided input into this blueprint, as did current DSPs, who helped to validate situation, situational judgment scenarios that were added onto both exam forms. We developed a Direct Support Professional I entry level and Direct Support Professional II emerging level exams in consultation with a psychometric company called Meazure Learning. The exams were offered through safe, online, remote proctored portals, so they could be taken anywhere at anytime. We would be notified by the exam proctor if they suspected that there could have been any type of cheating. And they were administered through a secure portal so that the exams could not be saved or shared. We included in our pool of pilot learners folks from participant direction and people who were seeking employment as direct support professionals, both of our exam forms were found to have performed within acceptable thresholds for certification exams, and to be psychometrically acceptable. So, we were

very happy about that. We will be seeking to go out for NCCA accreditation in 2026. Next slide, please. So, how did we do? This table shows our certification pilot outcomes as of actually this is the end of October of 2025. So, you can see here for our E Badge Academy, we had a total of 194 direct support professionals earn at least the DSP I, but many of them moved forward to the DSP III. For the Department of Labor Apprenticeship Model, we had 269 direct support professionals earn their DSP III level, which is considered to be the completion of the apprentice program. And others were in progress. You can see from the DSP TAP, we had 426 direct support professionals who earned the DSP I. And 260 of them went forward to earn their Direct Support Professional Level II certificate as well. So, in total, across all three of our pilots, we awarded 100, or sorry, 1,351 certificates to direct support professionals within the State of Georgia, in just over maybe 18 month period of time. Next slide, please. Okay, so, for our final, our final slide, we had external evaluation to take a look at our direct support professional programs. And we found that across all three of the pilots, organizational satisfaction was at 100%. Direct support professionals who participated in our pilot showed that they also had very high levels of satisfaction with each of the pilot projects; 87% for the E Badge Academy, 90% for the Department of Labor, and 98% for our online Direct Support Professional Training and Assessment Program. In terms of impact and retention, direct support professionals intended to stay in the field for six or more years at high levels for all three pilots as well. And direct support professionals also felt that they were better equipped to provide high quality supports at 98 to 100% across all three pilots. What's next for us is to continue to build the direct support professional training and assessment program to begin to offer it to additional staff in participant direction and begin targeting recruitment through the American job centers, high schools, and community colleges, to allow for people who are non traditional to enter the workforce, which could include people with disabilities, or perhaps younger, younger workers, to earn a credential, and then find suitable hire at a wage that shows their accomplishment of earning the certification in Georgia. And we are currently working with our Department of Labor at looking at expanding some of these pilots and having our final evaluation reports in 2026. Thank you. Thank you so much, Dr. Britton Laws. And thank you so much to Jack. I learned so much. And we have so many great questions in the Q&A box. I wish we had time to answer them all. But we only have a couple minutes left. So, I thought I would ask, at least just the one that's on here, the first one, because I think any of you could answer it, and it is a question that I think a lot of people probably have, which is what are some strategies you can recommend to help direct support professionals see this work as a long term career rather than an entry level job? And I will leave it to anyone on the panel.

>> One of the strategies that our provider partners have used is making sure that as you are recruiting direct support professionals to incorporate competency based training into the

training from the point of hire. So, while all of our states have mandated training that staff need to have in order to work directly with people with disabilities, working competency based training in from an early part in their career, and pointing out that there are career levels within the organization that a DSP can advance into is really important, so that when they start work, they recognize that there is, indeed, a pathway that they can stay within, in order to continue to grow with the organization. One example that is within our DSP TAP project, we are now looking at how to support direct support professionals from the DSP III level to become developmental disability professionals, which typically requires a bachelor's degree. But we are writing our new exam blueprint to be able to reflect the knowledge and skills that they will need in that position, that they might be able to move into it in lieu of a bachelor's degree, if they have years of work on the job.

>> Oh, I love that, that skills based way to get people to move forward. Thank you so much. I wish we could, there are so many more questions, I wish we had more time to answer them, but please feel free to continue asking the chat if there's any way that we can get those responses out to you, we will. But, unfortunately, we're about wrapping up for today. If we can move to the next slide. I just really quickly want to know if this was interesting to you, if you're interested in your state, working on direct support professional career pathways, and helping people with disabilities engage the workforce system, we offer technical assistance. So, here's the LEAD Center. We are a WIOA technical assistance center funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy through the Department of Labor. And we are here to help you, with the workforce professionals, American job centers, workforce boards, anything related to WIOA, that want to serve people with disabilities, reach out to us. We would love to support you. And there should be a link about technical assistance that is sent to you in the chat. We're going to move to the next slide. Yes, I would encourage you, please, oh, we have some e mails; info@leadcenter.org. Please reach out to us. We would love to hear from you and support you in any way we can. Next slide. I also would highly encourage you, if you haven't already done so, sign up for updates, subscribe to the Lead Center website at leadcenter.org. We're always, we always have new things. Please visit our website, infographic, I know we'll have those webinar archives in about 10 business days. We have a newsletter that comes out periodically. You don't want to miss our updates, so please subscribe to our website. And on the next slide. We would also encourage you to follow us at all of our social medias, whether that's Facebook, X, LinkedIn, or YouTube. Please visit us there and follow us. And with that, on behalf of the LEAD Center, and thank you to all of our presenters today, Assistant Secretary Hocker, I want to thank you all for sharing your expertise. I appreciate you being here. And I hope all of you have a wonderful rest of your day. Thank you.