

Creating Registered Apprenticeship Programs for Direct Support Professionals

Direct support professionals (DSPs) play a crucial role in supporting people with disabilities. DSPs are members of the direct care workforce who help people develop and strengthen life skills that are essential for independent living, community participation, and employment. DSPs support an individual's independence and well-being in a nonclinical capacity. Their duties go beyond basic physical care and may include aiding people with skill building for community engagement, work readiness, education and training, obtaining and maintaining employment, communication, self-advocacy, and social integration.

There is currently a severe shortage of DSPs in the United States, due in part to lack of awareness about this profession, lack of training opportunities, and a perception that advancement opportunities are limited. In fact, DSP jobs are the perfect entryway to a variety of careers. Most people in leadership positions in human services and the disability field started their careers as DSPs. Registered Apprenticeship Programs (RAPs) can open this door and help meet the demand for direct care workers by recruiting, training, and retaining DSPs in areas of greatest need. This document provides responses to questions raised by workforce professionals from American Job Centers (AJCs), workforce development boards, employers, and other partners on how to create RAPs for DSPs.

What are states doing currently to help train DSPs?

States have introduced training curricula for DSPs to master the competencies they need to succeed in their roles. Some examples of existing training curricula include:

- **Wisconsin Certified Direct Care Professional Training and Certification**: DSPs receive free online training and certification testing and a \$500 bonus. They can add their name to the state's registry to match with employers.
- **SUNY Microcredentials**: State University of New York campuses across New York State offer three credentials (DSP-I, DSP-II, DSP-III) as well as college credit. DSPs receive a \$750 incentive for completing each level.
- **DSP Classroom Training**: Required in Illinois for all newly hired DSPs, this training covers six modules plus CPR/First Aid training.

What is the best way to get started for an organization interested in hiring DSP apprentices?

The first step is to establish contact with the state director of the registration agency. Staff in registration agencies are responsible for the development and approval of RAPs in their assigned state. Information about how to locate the appropriate state director can be found at [Apprenticeship.gov](https://www.apprenticeship.gov).

State apprenticeship representatives serve as key resources throughout the development process, offering direction on registration requirements and available resources. (See “How can organizations develop and register DSP apprenticeships?” below for further information.)

Organizations exploring DSP apprenticeships can join an existing registered apprenticeship program or create a new, customized program based on their needs. [Guidance on either option is available.](#)

How can organizations develop and register their own DSP RAPs?

RAPs are registered locally in the state where the sponsor is located. RAP experts are available in every state to assist organizations interested in developing and maintaining RAPs as a recruitment, training, and retention tool to build a quality workforce.

The apprenticeship system consists of two types of registration agencies that register and oversee RAPs. These agencies include the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Apprenticeship (OA) and recognized state apprenticeship agencies (SAAs).

Both the OA and SAAs provide technical assistance and support to program sponsors, answer questions about the apprenticeship model, guide partners on each phase of developing a RAP, connect businesses to training providers, and advise partners on available funding sources to support apprenticeships. Both the OA and SAAs result in RAPs with all the same benefits for their partners. An organization’s first step in establishing a RAP is to contact the OA or the local SAA. Learn more and find the appropriate contact in your state at [Apprenticeship.gov](https://www.apprenticeship.gov).

The local apprenticeship representative serves as a key resource throughout the development process, offering guidance on registration requirements and available resources. Registration agencies also design standards of apprenticeship—an organized, written plan detailing the terms and conditions of employment, training, and supervision of one or more apprentices in an approved occupation—to meet the needs of the employer within federal, state, and local regulations.

Certain contractors funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, known as industry intermediaries, also assist in developing apprenticeship programs. While they do not have the authority to approve RAPs, intermediaries can help organizations design their programs to align with state and federal standards and often collaborate directly with state apprenticeship representatives during the registration process.

RAPs for DSPs are emerging and still relatively rare. As of February 2025, at least 14 states (California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, North Dakota, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Utah) offered RAPs for DSPs or closely related professions, such as social and human service assistants and direct support specialists.

Can the sponsor of a DSP RAP be someone other than the employer?

Yes, the sponsor of a DSP apprenticeship program (i.e., the entity responsible for the administration and oversight of the RAP) can be an organization other than the employer.

Whether it is the employer or another entity, the sponsor is responsible for managing the apprenticeship, including developing the standards of apprenticeship, coordinating training delivery, tracking apprentice progress, and ensuring compliance with regulatory requirements. In some cases, sponsors may also secure funding and manage partnerships with educational institutions and workforce development organizations.

Non-employer sponsors may include:

- **Industry associations and consortia:** Groups representing multiple employers in the same sector can serve as sponsors, pooling resources and standardizing training across multiple organizations.
- **Labor unions:** Unions often act as sponsors, particularly when supporting apprenticeships across multiple employers within an industry.
- **Workforce development boards or state agencies:** These entities can sponsor apprenticeships as part of broader regional workforce initiatives.
- **Educational institutions:** Colleges or technical schools can serve as sponsors when they provide both related instruction and program oversight.

What role do workforce partners within AJCs play in developing a DSP RAP?

Workforce partners play a vital role in the development and success of RAPs by providing strategic support, resources, and collaboration throughout the program's lifecycle. They help strengthen the program's design, accessibility, and long-term sustainability. The areas in which workforce partners support RAPs include:

- **Program development and standardization:** Workforce partners can contribute expertise to help design the apprenticeship framework, including establishing clear standards for competency demonstration, work-hour requirements, and assessment criteria. Their involvement ensures alignment with industry best practices and workforce development policies.
- **Resource coordination and funding:** Workforce partners often provide access to financial resources, such as training funds, tuition assistance, and employer incentives, which can help offset the costs of program implementation and apprentice participation.
- **Talent pipeline and recruitment support:** Workforce partners can assist in identifying, connecting, and supporting a pool of potential RAP candidates, including people with disabilities, helping to increase participation and successful outcomes in apprenticeship opportunities. Workforce partners also can reach out to potential employers of DSPs to ensure a job match and enhance career pipelines as part of the apprenticeship program.
- **Training and skill development:** Through collaboration with educational institutions and training providers, workforce partners can support the delivery of both foundational knowledge and specialized instruction that align with the competencies required for DSPs on the job.
- **Ongoing support and program sustainability:** Workforce partners can assist with program administration, compliance monitoring, and long-term evaluation to ensure that the apprenticeship continues to meet industry standards and adapts to evolving workforce needs.

Who funds the instructional portion of a DSP apprenticeship?

The instructional portion of a DSP apprenticeship can be funded in several ways. Many sponsors cover the full cost of instruction to ensure that apprentices bear no financial burden. However, if the costs are prohibitive, organizations can also leverage available federal, state, and local resources.

One useful strategy involves blending, braiding, and sequencing different funding sources to help pay for the instruction and supportive services that DSP apprentices may need to participate in a RAP. Blending refers to combining funds from multiple sources into one shared pot. Braiding means using multiple funding sources separately and simultaneously. Sequencing means using multiple funding sources sequentially. This [FAQ](#) from the U.S. Department of Labor provides additional insights.

In addition, DSP apprentices may tap into active tuition reimbursement programs, federal financial aid, Pell grants, GI Bill funds, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funding, apprenticeship grants (which vary by state), and support from local workforce development boards and AJC program partners, including vocational rehabilitation.

Do sponsors establish work hours for DSP apprenticeships?

Apprenticeship sponsors can set work-hour requirements for a DSP apprenticeship depending on the program structure, which must be clearly defined within the standards of apprenticeship. For example:

- **Competency-based program:** In a competency-based RAP, completion is determined by the apprentice's ability to demonstrate all required competencies outlined in the standards of apprenticeship, rather than by a set number of work hours.
- **Time-based program:** A time-based RAP requires a set number of work hours to be completed to ensure that the apprentice has gained sufficient on-the-job experience. Completion is based on fulfilling these required work hours, regardless of the pace at which competencies are demonstrated.
- **Hybrid program:** RAPs may use a hybrid approach, combining both competency demonstration and completion of a minimum number of work hours. Hybrid programs ensure that apprentices gain both theoretical knowledge and practical experience.

Competency-based programs are measured by skill mastery while time-based and hybrid programs are measured in time. Apprentices may work part-time in any of these models, which may extend the time needed to complete the program.

Who may apply for and participate in a RAP?

Sponsors use RAPs to attract, train, and retain employees and to attract lifelong learners into their organization. Sponsors are responsible for establishing minimum requirements and the selection

procedure to determine who can apply and participate in a RAP, subject to applicable regulations, but the goal is to remove unnecessary requirements and to welcome the greatest number of applicants possible.

In general, apprentices must be at least 16 years old to participate in a RAP. Some occupations require a minimum age of 18 for safety reasons. Additional minimum requirements as established by the program sponsor may involve education qualifications, previous experience, health and fitness (including drug testing), driver's license, background checks, references, and aptitude test scores. In all cases, minimum requirements for participation should focus on essential skills and qualifications necessary for successful job performance with or without reasonable accommodations.

Sponsors also establish written selection procedures for RAPs that are aligned with applicable federal and state nondiscrimination laws, and that ensure all applicants have the same opportunity to participate.

Will DSP apprentices get paid more after completing a RAP?

RAPs have a progressive wage scale. Apprentices will receive an entry wage to start (at or above minimum wage, unless otherwise allowed by law), at least one wage increase, and a final wage. Apprentices will typically start at a lower wage than the employer's entry wage because they are not yet fully qualified for the job for which they are training. As apprentices gain competency, they will receive pay increases until they are fully qualified and earning the full entry wage.

SAAAs, the OA, and industry intermediaries can assist apprenticeship sponsors with developing a wage scale that aligns with the employer's needs while ensuring fairness and compliance.

What credentials do DSP apprentices earn?

Apprentices receive a certificate of completion upon finishing their apprenticeship program. The work completed during the RAP may also qualify the apprentice for additional industry credentials specific to the occupation. Credentials may include licensure, certifications, academic credentials, or degrees.

The apprenticeship sponsor will also award recognitions to the apprentice to best meet the needs of both the employer and the apprentice.

Can DSP apprentices take breaks and return to finish the program?

Yes, DSP apprentices may leave the program at any time and request to return. RAPs may also grant temporary leave due to pregnancy, injury, or other personal circumstances. In some cases, an apprentice may be able to attend the instructional portion of the program but may need to take a break from the on-the-job learning; they would still be considered “active” in the RAP, but their date of completion would need to be extended.

The sponsor decides whether an apprentice may return from a leave. The employer decides the stage of the program the apprentice may resume. Sponsors and employers may wish to review how the company has previously handled similar situations to ensure consistency.

Apprentices should be allowed to return to the program the same way others return to work for the employer. Apprentice regulations require that apprentices be treated the same as other workers in the organization.

How do we know that RAPs will recruit and retain more DSPs?

RAPs across various industries have successfully demonstrated high rates of completion and retention. Strategies like providing apprentices with comprehensive support services throughout the program can significantly improve retention and completion rates. Effective support includes:

- **Financial support:** Covering the costs of related instruction and providing wages during on-the-job learning help apprentices focus on skill development without financial strain.
- **Support services:** Access to services such as childcare, affordable housing, and transportation assistance may remove barriers that could prevent apprentices from completing the program.
- **Direct service coordination:** AJC program partners can offer targeted support by connecting apprentices with resources, helping them balance work and personal responsibilities.

While DSP apprenticeships are still emerging and need to be studied further, the understanding of best practices from other RAPs, along with collaboration with workforce programs, will support recruitment and retention success in DSP RAPs.

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