

# State-Level Cross Agency Collaborations

## Webinar Transcript

>> Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome. I thank you for joining us today for our webinar, State-Level Cross Agency Collaboration: Stories and Strategies from the Field Designed to Address the Direct Support Staff Crisis. On behalf of the LEAD Center, I'm so excited you've joined us today to hear about the Direct Care Workforce Strategy Center and how they support states address their direct care workforce needs. We'll explore some helpful LEAD Center resources and learn about partners in North Carolina who are working together to strengthen their state's direct support professional workforce. So we've got a lot to get to. But before we begin, I want to acknowledge that the LEAD Center is led by National Disability Institute and funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy. Next slide. My name is Sarah Loizeaux. I will be the facilitator for today. I serve as subject matter expert on accessible career pathways with the LEAD Center at National Disability Institute. I really look forward to guiding today's discussion and introducing our presenters. Next slide. So I'd like to go through a few housekeeping items to help make sure you get the most out of today's session. You can turn on captioning through the show captions option in Zoom, or you can open the captioning link posted in the chat. The browser version lets you adjust text size, color, and background to match your preferences. Today's session is being recorded. The recording and materials will be available on the LEAD Center website under recent and upcoming events within 10 business days. Next slide, please. We love your questions and we'd love to hear from you throughout today's session. So for any questions regarding the content from the presenters you hear today, please use the question and answer or Q&A panel at the bottom of the screen and we'll address as many as we possibly can throughout the presentation and at the end. And if you have any technical support needs, please type that question into the chat box and someone on our team will assist you. So before I bring on the first speaker, I'd like to thank the Office of Disability Employment Policy, also known as ODEP, for their leadership and support in putting together today's webinar. Allow me to share a brief overview of ODEP and the work they do. ODEP is a sub-cabinet level agency within the Department of Labor, and the only non-regulatory federal agency of its kind. ODEP works with employers and government partners to strengthen workplace access and create meaningful opportunities for people with disabilities. Next slide. ODEP's mission is focused on shaping policies and practices that expand and enhance access to employment and training opportunities for Americans with disabilities, while also aligning opportunities with what employers need. ODEP's mission helps ensure that people with disabilities can pursue meaningful career pathways and that businesses have access to a highly skilled

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talent pool. Next slide. And to set the stage for today's webinar and to provide opening remarks, I am so pleased to introduce Shelley Hendren, Senior Policy Advisor with the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy. Shelley came to ODEP from the Rehabilitation Services Administration, where she was responsible for delivering technical assistance to state vocational rehabilitation, or VR, programs. Shelley previously worked for 17 years from the state of Nevada, holding leadership positions within its Department of Labor. She was the head of the state's rehabilitation division, consisting of VR, blind services, the Randolph-Sheppard Program, and Social Security's Disability Determination Services Program. Shelley was the administrator of Nevada's Equal Rights Commission and has expertise in federal anti-discrimination laws, including the ADA. Shelley was appointed to the Governor's Workforce Development Board and the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities in Nevada. She's graduated magna cum laude from Park University. She's an NRLI graduate and a graduate of the Nationally Recognized Certified Public Manager Program. Shelley was a United States Peace Corps volunteer and is bilingual in Spanish. And with that, Shelley, I'm going to hand it over to you. Welcome.

>> All right. Thank you so much, Sarah. Hello and welcome everyone. So we've all come together here today because we understand that critical connection between the direct care workforce shortage and the ability for people with disabilities to work, and live independently, and thrive. So supporting both the workforce and the people they serve is essential to our work. And today's conversation is about how we can do that effectively. Our webinar today highlights practical, replicable strategies that states can use to attract, train, and retain direct support professionals, or DSPs. And this is a top priority across the country, and we've seen some encouraging momentum. So for example, in the last year, the number of states offering registered apprenticeship programs for DSPs has nearly doubled, now totaling more than 22 programs across 16 states. Other states, like North Carolina, are building strong competency-based training programs for direct care workers, including DSPs. North Carolina, featured in our webinar today, is providing standardized initial DSP training through employers and then offering advanced training through their community college system. And these advanced courses also count toward an associate's degree, creating a meaningful career pathway for folks entering the DSP workforce. So DSPs are central, also, to ODEP's mission. They support individuals with disabilities in developing and strengthening the skills they need for independent living, full community participation, and success in employment. Their work touches every aspect of a person's journey from work readiness to communication, self-advocacy, education, and social integration. And these priorities are shared by ODEP and the Administration for Community Living, and our partners at the LEAD Center and the Direct Care Workforce Strategy Center.

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So we are so pleased to collaborate today to bring you insights from North Carolina, one of the states that both centers are actively supporting. So, again, thank you to our partners and to our speakers today for your leadership and shared commitment. Thank you to each of you and the audience for the work that you do every day to support people with disabilities and the professionals who assist them. And we hope today's webinar is valuable and inspiring to you. So back to you, Sarah.

>> Thank you so much, Shelley, for those opening remarks. Go to the next slide, please. So we've got a lot to cover today. By the end of today's webinar, we will have covered understanding the role of the direct support professional, also called DSP for short, and understand how the DSP work experience can lead to careers in workforce development, healthcare, education, social services, and other fields. By the end of this session, we will learn how to use the new DSP career exploration infographic and frequently asked questions on registered apprenticeship programs as practical tools to guide job seekers interested in being DSPs. We are going to hear about how North Carolina has partnered to launch a tuition-free DSP advanced training, build career pathways, and strengthen the DSP workforce statewide. We're going to also be hearing from the Direct Care Workforce Strategies Center and the work that they do to support states across the country. So, again, a lot to get into. We'll go to the next slide. So to get us started, I would like to introduce our first two presenters. Leah Cadena-Igdalsky is a senior associate at Social Policy Research Associates, or SPR, and a subject matter expert on the direct care workforce for the LEAD Center. Leah has also had the pleasure of managing SPR's work as the evaluation partner for the Direct Care Workforce Strategy Center on behalf of the National Council on Aging and ACL, also known as Administration for Community Living. Leah enjoys working directly with local and state agencies to take on recruitment and retention issues for direct care workforce, conducting research, and connecting with people across the country, trying innovative and impactful strategies. Leah is proud to have started her career working in direct support roles and aims to champion the strengths of direct care workers and the people they support in all of her work. Joining Leah is Nicole Howell, who is a dedicated advocate for aging services and the rights of older adults, committed to driving meaningful change to strengthen the direct care workforce and expand access to care for older adults and their families. Nicole currently serves as the Director of the Direct Care Workforce Development at the National Council on Aging, where she leads the work of the Direct Care Workforce Strategy Center, empowering states to leverage comprehensive systems change strategies to grow and strengthen the home and community-based services direct care workforce supporting older adults and individuals with disabilities. Prior to joining the National Council on Aging, Nicole was the director of workforce policy at Leading Age, where she championed innovative policy solutions to support the aging services sector.

She also served as health policy advisor to Congressman Bill Pascrell, Jr. of New Jersey, managing a legislative portfolio that included health care, social security, and veterans affairs. Nicole was a 2021-2022 Health and Aging Policy Fellow, during which she worked with the House Committee on Ways and Means Health Subcommittee, focusing on long-term care, elder justice, aging services, and workforce policy. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from the University of Nevada, Reno. So with that, two amazing experts, we'll get started with Leah. Leah, the floor is yours.

>> Thank you so much, Sarah. And it is really my pleasure to be on with all of you today and to get to talk about such an important topic. And I have the pleasure of getting to share some of the resources related to the DSP workforce that have been created by the LEAD Center. But before I jump into that, we wanted to take just a moment to make sure we all have a shared foundation about exactly who we're talking about when we're talking about DSPs. And we want to stress that distinction that Shelley mentioned in her opening remarks about the many hats that direct support professionals wear and the work that they do supporting people with disabilities around their goals for independent living, community participation, and employment. So DSPs are part of the broader umbrella of the direct care workforce. But the work that they do really goes beyond personal care or clinical tasks. They're really supporting folks with disabilities around their goals related to work readiness, education and training, self advocacy, and much more. So we can go to the next slide, please. So I am thrilled to share a new home for all things DSP on the LEAD Center websites. So -- On the Lead Center website, excuse me. Since our last DSP webinar, which happened back in December, we've now built out a dedicated page on the Lead Center website, which can be sort of your first stop, your one-stop shop for all of the resources, links, all that good stuff coming out from the Lead Center related to the direct support professional workforce. So I'm going to spend a little bit of time sharing with you some of the things you can find on that website. And we love hearing from folks about how they might be using those resources or any support that they need to use the documents, the memos, the FAQs that we're creating in their context. So a little bit later on, we'll talk a little bit about how to get in touch with us and let us know if you need a little bit of technical assistance to use those great resources. So I am actually going to do a little bit of a live demo today to really orient folks to this new page on our website, make sure people can find what they need, and highlight just a few particular resources that we think might be really relevant for folks who are on the call today. So the first thing I'm going to do is show you how you find that DSP page when you go to the LEAD Center website. So it lives under Workforce Development. You'll see now the very first dropdown is the Direct Support Professional DSP Workforce. So when you go to this new page, this is where you'll find all of the resources that we're putting out and we're continuously updating this page. So, for example, the recording and the transcript from today's webinar, once it's all complete, will ultimately live on this page.

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So you'll be able to find all of our DSP work relatively easily. That's our goal. So with our time today, I won't go through everything that you can find on this page, but instead I'm just going to take a few moments to highlight two particular resources that we think attendees today might find especially useful. So the first one that I'm going to spend a little bit of time on, if you scroll down just a little bit, you'll see something called our FAQ related to registered apprenticeship programs for DSPs. So if you've got the LEAD Center website up on your screen, you can follow along with me. I'm going to go ahead and open this FAQ document. And what this is is, as Shelley noted in her opening remarks, registered apprenticeships for DSPs have been growing. And registered apprenticeship programs can really help to meet the demand for DSPs where there's a need for recruitment, training, and retention in a particular community. So we are hearing from lots of folks in different states that have an interest in registered apprenticeship as a strategy, but maybe don't quite know where to begin. The good news is because so many folks are working from this, you don't need to reinvent the wheel. If you are someone who might be from a workforce development board, an AJC, or American Job Center, you might be from a provider agency, or you might be a DSP or a prospective DSP yourself, you now have this frequently asked questions document as a place to start for all things related to starting up and registering an apprenticeship program for DSPs. And this FAQ document that you see on the screen really highlights how apprenticeships as a strategy offer paid work experience, structured training, and progressive wage increases, plus a nationally recognized credential and -- a nationally recognized credential. And that apprenticeship can be a strategy to combat some of those common barriers that we hear, you know, to recruiting new folks to enter the DSP profession, eliminate awareness of what DSPs do, insufficient training, or an unclear advancement pathway. And I'll highlight that you could think of this FAQ document as sort of everything you wanted to know about registered apprenticeship but were too afraid to ask. Like, this document really gets into some of the nitty gritty about how do you start up a registered apprenticeship program for direct support professionals? Who is eligible to be a sponsor of one of these registered apprenticeship programs? And who do you go to when you need some support, some advice within your state about really specific questions? How to develop the program. How to fund the instructional costs. What the requirements are to establish a program. So on and so forth. So we hope that this particular resource will be a place where you can really get a first answer to many of these questions, plus ideas about what your next steps are for getting additional support to start up or even expand a program in your community. And I have to give a special thank you to the Office of Apprenticeship within DOL for all of their invaluable support to us in creating this resource. So up next, I'm going to go back to that DSP workforce page and I'm going to highlight just one more resource. But this is one that we are really excited about because it really directly connects to the speakers that you'll hear today from North Carolina. So the next thing I'm going to pull up on my screen is an infographic that we created to demonstrate career growth and potential for direct support professionals.

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So if you're following along, you can go ahead and open it up on your screen as well. And really the impetus or inspiration for creating this resource was to highlight all of the opportunities for DSPs to grow in their careers. Because not everyone realizes that in addition to being a meaningful, impactful profession in and of itself, DSP jobs are also really a perfect entryway to a variety of careers. And as Sarah mentioned, many of the folks on today's webinar got their starts as DSPs. And many people in leadership positions within the fields of human services and even the disability field more broadly, got their start in this field as a DSP. Given the fact that being a direct support professional is truly a multidisciplinary profession in which you may be focused on tasks ranging from supporting someone around social integration and community engagement to finding and maintaining employment, often all in the same day, DSPs are really exposed to working in many different professional fields. So we created this infographic tool to make sure to clearly communicate that both to folks who are DSPs or are considering becoming DSPs, but also to employers who are hiring direct support professionals and workforce systems partners like career counselors and staff in American Job Centers. So we decided to create this infographic in which you see that DSP is smack in the middle, which is really meant to demonstrate the skills and competencies for DSPs that they're building across the domains of education, clinical health care, community and social services, and employment and rehabilitation support. So the circles that you see stemming out from that middle DSP circle represent median wages for these professions. So you see we have DSP in the middle and we have all these different related careers that are plotted on what is their national median wage. So you'll see this first inner circle represents a median wage of 30,000, 45,000, up through \$90,000. The other thing that we tried to demonstrate on this infographic is the average education that's required to get into a particular profession. So, for example, you'll see that a social worker is in this orange color with four graduation caps. So the key at the bottom tells you that, typically, a master's degree is required for that profession. All the purple circles represent that you typically need a high school diploma or certificate to enter the field. Blue indicates that you need an associate's degree. So on and so forth all the way through the doctoral degree level. And, of course, education requirements and median wages vary widely by region. So this is all national information that's really meant to serve as a guide from which folks can dig deeper into specific details that are relevant to their own community. And if you've got the infographic open up on your screen, you'll also notice that each of these job titles is a link. So I'm going to show you what happens when you click on one of those links. So we designed this to work as a printed document. But if you're able to open this on your computer, your phone, a tablet, there's a lot of actually interactivity built within. So I'll show you some more of the information that you can access. So I'm going to pick just one of the careers on here and show you what happens when you click the link for social worker. And you'll just bear with me as it loads on my screen. So what happens when you click on the link is that a page opens on a website that's called My Next Move.

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My Next Move is a resource for job seekers to learn all about a potential profession. So it tells you about some of the alternate titles that you might hear this job called. The knowledge, skills, and abilities that you typically need to succeed in this role. And perhaps of particular interest to job seekers, it tells you about the job outlook. What the demand looks like in the future. So when you click on one of those links within our infographic, it brings you to the page on My Next Move. And you'll see all of that education and salary information that we included on the infographic comes directly from My Next Move. And in case this isn't enough information, at the bottom of My Next Move, you can actually click on another link to open a page from O\*NET which tells you even more about a particular occupation. And, of course, O\*NET and My Next Move, all that information comes from the Employment and Training Administration. So you know that you can get a lot of important national level labor market information. So I'll stop sharing there and pass it back over to bring our slide deck up. Wonderful. Well, we are going to have a chunk of time at the end for questions. But before I turn it over to Nicole, I'd welcome, Sarah, if there have been any questions that have come in to Q&A so far, we probably have time to take one of those right now.

>> Yeah. So we had a question from Jill who's in Pennsylvania. So she said one of the biggest problems in our state is that DSPs often are offered part-time hours with no health insurance, vacation, retirement, or other benefits that are so essential. And it's likely one of the biggest reasons we have a DSP shortage. Do you know if these issues are being talked about or what are some solutions to that that you can think of?

>> Yeah. Sure, that's a great question and thanks for asking it because one of the many barriers to some folks wanting to become a DSP is wages, but also benefits, right? Being able to have one full-time job that provides you the benefits that you need to take care of a family, to succeed at work, all of those good things. So I will say there is a lot of conversation going on in states all across the country about this exact topic and some of the strategies that individual providers are using to address these issues where they come up. And one thing I'll add is that a place where we've seen some movement in addressing some of these barriers is where provider organizations really come together, right? That way, instead of one particular provider in one locality trying to figure out the very complexities of having enough DSPs to support, you know, all of the folks that they're serving, ensuring that scheduling works out, all of that -- those complex challenges. When provider organizations come together and, in particular, when provider organizations coming together work with the agencies within their state, that is one of the places where we've really seen some systemic improvement made so that this isn't a one-off challenge that every provider has to face on their own. As Jill referenced, it really is a tricky issue. So I would say two things.

That would be one, provider voice coming together and worker voice along with the state agencies to find that balance of -- One of the beautiful things about being a DSP is that it can offer part-time, evening, weekend shifts. And, in fact, that's what attracts a lot of people to the field. But for those folks who truly are looking for that full-time schedule, balancing that, that would be my sort of best advice there. But that's a great question.

>> Thank you. And I would add registered apprenticeship is also a great solution added to this and an ability to help move into a meaningful career pathway. So, yeah. Thank you, Leah. I love that answer. Are we going to bring on Nicole now, Leah?

>> Yes. Yeah, thanks so much. It is my pleasure to hand it over to Nicole Howell, who will speak about the Direct Care Workforce Strategy Center.

>> Excellent. Thank you, Leah. Thank you, Sarah. And for everyone being on today. I really appreciate you taking the time to learn along with us. So as you heard, my name's Nicole. I'm the director of the Direct Care Workforce Strategy Center at National Council on Aging. We are funded through the Administration on Community Living. And as, you know, what many of us have likely worked in this field for many years, the world came to know what we did in 2020, which is that our sector, broadly speaking, of direct care workers is under significant strain and we need a national strategy to address that. We need to support state systems to develop innovations at the ground level that are going to work for them, they're going to increase and grow the direct care workforce, they're going to strengthen worker wellbeing, and will enhance career pathways like we were just talking about with the last question. So the Strategy Center was launched in 2022 and we are now in our fourth year, and we've had two and a half years of technical assistance. And so the chief role of the Strategy Center, it's really three. The first is that we provide direct technical assistance to states to achieve identified and well-defined milestones to improve the direct care workforce. And those milestones can range from setting up streamlined data evaluation systems, developing curriculum, establishing a direct care -- or a sort of unified direct care pathway. It can also include setting up advisory committees. States, I think it's very important to note, are at a variety of places in this work and -- But, really, all are seeking to address this in different ways. So the first thing is we work with states to provide direct technical assistance. And part of that is a peer-to-peer sharing. We empower states and connect them with other states working on similar issues to learn not only what is going well in other places, but some of the challenges that they're experiencing, and so that -- really can see the commonalities across. And from those, working with states and understanding some of those challenges and opportunities, we then surface tools and resources that we think are ready for broader adoption. And we also have a clearinghouse of resources and tools that are developed by some of our partners and others, like the LEAD Center, and we publish those as well.

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So we really are a one-stop shop for things happening in the direct care workforce universe, and we encourage you to visit our website. May I have the next slide, please? So, as you heard, part of what we do is as we are working with states, we also work with evaluators like Leah at SPR to evaluate our effectiveness, determine what is working in states to help grow and increase their direct care workforce, and improve the systems and identify those best practices. And, again, I think it's important to note that states have a varying degree of systems in place and our job is really there to support them wherever that may be. Next slide, please. But we do not do this work alone. It truly is a collaborative, all hands to the pump effort. Again, led by National Council of Aging. We have truly distinguished partners like PHI, UMN ICI, as well as other national partners who both support states with direct technical assistance, but also keep our thinking honest. Some of our partners develop tools and resources for us, including some that I will talk about shortly that will be coming out in the very near future. But I just want to note that this really is a national effort. Next slide, please. So let's talk about that direct technical assistance. And my hope is, as you see this, you'll start thinking, gosh, how can my state get involved? So, again, we provide truly distinguished subject matter experts to support states to achieve their milestone through what we call the State Advancement Lab, or SAL. And that runs between nine and 12 months, and states receive up to 250 hours of technical assistance. As part of that, states participate in monthly peer-learning collaboratives where they hear from expert speakers and learn alongside their peer states. And we have a newly launched level of technical assistance. As you may have noted, our traditional model takes place over an extended period of time, nine to 12 months, requires states come together with cross-state teams. So it's not just aging, it's not just disability, but truly a collaborative, integrated approach to tackling challenges. This on-demand TA is designed to states that we are not currently working with that really have a discrete question that needs to be answered, likely in regards to maybe a specific challenge they're encountering. It's over, you know, 30 to 45 days. And you can find information about all of these levels of TA at our website. But, again, there's a variety of ways for states to engage with us. And I'm guessing you're probably thinking, okay, Nicole, so tell me what you've done. What states have you worked with? So if I can have the next slide, I can get to that. So over the course of the two and a half years we've been providing direct technical assistance, we have worked with 27 states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. And currently we're supporting 17 states in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. And these states are those highlighted in yellow that you'll see. They've worked with us between, you know, one and two and a half years. And they have achieved significant milestones. I'd like to point to -- You're going to hear from North Carolina, one of our states, shortly. But some of the real achievements and victories we've seen is New Jersey developing a strategic plan across 40 state agencies as to how they are going to address the direct care workforce moving forward and that crisis to grow and expand that.

You could be like a state like California that really invested over the last few years and is learning from those and is developing a curriculum related to IDD population. They see a real need coming back in their aging community. You could be like other states that have like -- who have developed comprehensive outreach strategies. Truly, states are in a variety of places, but this is -- really shows the scope and the breadth of the amount of individuals who are coming to this issue and seeking to address real life challenges. So one thing that we're going to hear in the future is we have some significant resources and tools that we develop. And in the near future, you're going to see a few things coming out. The first is a series of reports related to AI in the direct care workforce, and the opportunities moving forward, and how that might reshape our field and enhance worker wellbeing. And we'll also be developing -- We'll also be hosting the second of this webinar series on July 22nd. So I know that what you really want to hear from is our state, so I am going to turn it back to Sarah who's going to move the webinar forward. Sarah, thank you so much.

>> Thank you so much, Nicole. And, oh, I'm really interested in learning about how technology and AI can advance the direct care workforce. So I am definitely interested in hearing about that. We have time for one question before we bring up, Nicole, so don't go way too far, before we bring out the folks in North Carolina. And I thought this was a really good question, Nicole. Someone asked in the question what does participation in a peer-learning collaborative look like for a state team? What's the time commitment to take part?

>> That's so great. So I should say the peer-learning collaborative is part of the state advancement lab. So that is part of your overall time commitment that you were receiving through the technical assistance, not just the TA, but then you get that golden ticket to a monthly peer-learning collaborative. So that's a 90 minute meeting every month. And that's in addition to your SME hours. And so I would generally say speaking -- states are working, you know, probably with the SME 10 to 15 hours a month over the, you know, over the course of the engagement.

>> Awesome. Oh thank you, Nicole. Appreciate that. Okay, we can move on to the next slide. And I am really excited to introduce our next two presenters from North Carolina, starting with Tina Barrett. Tina is -- Barrett is a Raleigh, North Carolina native and graduate of East Carolina University with a master's in psychology and concentration in intellectual and developmental disabilities. She is a licensed psychological associate with over 30 years of experience providing clinical and administrative services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities throughout the state of North Carolina. Including having worked in a state developmental center, several community-based facilities and agencies, and with Child Protective Services.

She joined North Carolina Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services in 2023 as the Intellectual and Developmental Disability Team Lead with the IDD, TBI, and Olmstead section, and advanced to the Assistant Director in 2025 where her responsibilities include policy and program development and coordination among state agencies and community partners. And Tina will be joined by Melissa Smith. She serves as Senior State Director of Health Science Programs for the North Carolina Community College System, providing oversight and support to health science programs across all 58 colleges in the system. With a career dedicated to developing educational programs and partnerships statewide, a master's science and education, a graduate certificate in counselor education from North Carolina State University, and recognition as the 2022 Community College Faculty of the Year by the North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges. She brings both educational expertise and a deep commitment to building meaningful pathways in behavioral health. And their collaboration in North Carolina is really incredible. So I will say no more. I will leave it up to Tina and Melissa. Welcome. And [inaudible] we'll leave you the floor.

>> Hi, Sarah. Thank you so much for inviting us and giving us an opportunity to speak. My name is Tina Barrett. And I'm not going to go over everything that we just talked about, but I just did want to mention that I started my career as a direct support professional. So this work is actually very near and dear to my heart. And in North Carolina, you know, one of the things that we've talked about for quite a while within the direct care workforce space is how it's overarching. And it not -- is not just the direct support professionals, but it also includes several other spaces. Within IDD, one of the things that we often talk about is how we live in all of the spaces and not all the spaces live in the world of intellectual and developmental disabilities. So our people are aging, our people have mental health issues, we live in the crisis space and the justice space and all of the spaces. So there's a lot of effort to recognize how important it is for our direct support professionals to not only have training specifically within intellectual and developmental disabilities, but in a lot of other spaces as well. So we heard a lot of information from our providers about what they're looking for for direct support professionals, what kind of training that they needed. And our state legislature does provide some guidance around the type of training that needs to be provided for those basic and core fundamental services. And, you know, we talk to our direct support professionals. You have your basic training. What comes next? What is it that you want most for yourself? We live in the world of nothing about us without us. So we, for sure, wanted to make sure that we were including our direct support professionals. Next slide. In 2024, North Carolina DHHS had an opportunity to have a significant amount of money that we could actually use for training opportunities. And we had started some work discussing, like, how are we going to help support our direct support professionals? One of the issues that we found frequently happened is that people came into the field accidentally.

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It was a case of my uncle has a disability, or, you know, my sister's brother's friend, you know, that, like, works in the field, or they stumbled into the world of intellectual and developmental disabilities. Which, of course, is not for everybody. And so there was a lot of idea, we want to bring people into the field with intention. Training is not inexpensive. So we wanted to focus on making sure that the training was high quality and also being provided for people that were invested in staying into the field. So there was a lot of discussion with the community colleges and it sort of got off the ground slowly to begin with because we're very siloed. And I think that was one of the things that we experienced is the level of silos that we were experiencing just between different agencies. The division of aging was addressing some work in the direct workforce. We were working in the direct support professional workforce. The community colleges were developing programs. And all of this was sort of happening, like, in different silos. So at the secretary level, there was quite a bit of collaboration with the recognition that, you know, all of this is kind of happening in different spaces. And there is, in fact, quite a bit of funds that are available to support training and work opportunities for the direct care workforce, including direct support professionals. So we were brought together on a higher level that then trickled down through the actual workers. So we did have an opportunity to work together to develop some advanced training coursework. And that was sort of refined between my team over at the Division of Mental Health Developmental Disabilities and Substance Use Services, and Melissa's team over at the North Carolina community college system. Next slide, please. So the advanced training program came to fruition. We were really excited. We -- The community colleges, as well as ourselves, we collaborated. We brought in actual direct support professionals who are working in the field to talk to them about what types of things are you really looking for, what do you want, how do we advance this opportunity for you. And then we collaborated and the direct community -- the college system, these are from -- They're educators. They know how to create training. This is what they do. This is their job. We may be the SMEs, we kind of recognize sort of that level of expertise, but we're going to hand it over to them. And they did the most amazing job of lifting that advanced training for us. So the advanced training is actually two eight-week courses. They are currently available at three of the community colleges. North Carolina is very lucky to have a very robust community college system. And the completion of both of the courses does actually lead to a certificate, but then it also leads to the opportunity to turn those courses into credits, actual credits, that can be directed towards an associate's degree. Now, in North Carolina, we have some additional opportunities that are coming up to create a pipeline. And one of the other things that we were very fortunate is that the community college system has an opportunity to reach into our high schools. So there's a lot of intentional recruitment that happens in that space as well. And it's an opportunity to introduce people into the space of intellectual and developmental disabilities in a very intentional way.

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Melissa, I'm going to hand it over to you with the next slide to talk a little bit more about the curriculum, since you guys did such an amazing job setting it up.

>> Well, thank you, Tina. And thank you all for having us to talk about this. And I can't brag enough about our social and human services faculty at the community college system. And these folks are the boots on the ground. You know, they're teaching in these programs and then in their spare time, as we say, they created this amazing curriculum working with our friends at DHHS. And we say we have to be friends before we could be partners. So we'll talk a little bit about that in a minute some of the things that came along in this journey. But, as Tina was saying, the advanced training curriculum, it's two eight-week courses and one is the core skills for supporting individuals with IDD and then advanced skills for DSPs. Those are the titles. Each class is 48 hours in length and -- based on the fact that they're online asynchronous. But because we also realize that we did some evaluating, and we'll talk more about the things that happened after we ran our first cohort, but we're also going to add some synchronous courses that have started this spring. Again, they were launched at the three community colleges during the fall 2025 semester. And we had some supporting funds to make sure this was tuition free to students. And as you see this quote here, they explored topics such as promoting independence and inclusion, effective communication, documentation and ethics, crisis prevention, supporting health and safety, and implementing individualized support plans. The program emphasizes a real-world application, self-reflection, and strategies that uphold dignity, respect, and self-determination for individuals served. And that's from the online course description at Forsyth Tech. And, like we said, we went into this as we wanted to make sure it was fluid, that it wasn't static. The collaboration is continuing, even though we're not really partners on paper. We know that this work is so important and we continue to make improvements, like we said, where we first did online asynchronous. And now we know, because of the learners, we have these synchronous courses and they're being very successful and well attended. So I want to turn it back over to Tina to talk a little bit more. Next slide.

>> Next slide, please. So before we before we go any further, I am happy to say that we had an opportunity to talk to Rachel Sites, who is a direct support professional at Caldwell Opportunities. And Caldwell Opportunities is one of our -- It's referred to as a day program in the state of North Carolina, but basically they provide meaningful day services. And also her supervisor, Julie Curry. Rachel is a student over at, I believe she's with Stanley. And she talks a little bit about her experiences taking the courses. One of the things that I will say, she's in her office here and, of course, the people that receive services from them were already gone for the day. But she -- At the time that we talked and had the opportunity to interview, Rachel was very close to finishing her second course. Since then she has completed her second course. So could we play that video?

[ Music ]

>> I'm a mom of a five-year-old who is my heart, my world. I love to do pottery and ceramics and I just really enjoy to read as well. Overall, the whole time I've been a direct support professional for about four and a half years. When I first got into the field, I was actually in a group home. Now I work at a day program and we have individuals being brought in and we also pick them up. And we bring them in and we work on community integration throughout the day and also with their person-centered plans. So I was looking at what qualifications I would need to be, like, a QP and how I could move up into the different roles that there are. And part of researching all that came up the pilot program months before it even started. And so I just kept following it. But it was something that I was very excited about because even though it wasn't a qualification to move up to a QP, it's still something in my toolbox that is very valuable.

>> I was excited for her because she just takes the initiative to go and find things that she knows that will help her and will help us. It's not just all about helping herself either, which is a big thing. She's actually got myself and Kristen, the program manager, involved in looking at some of the statements and some of the things. She's sent me -- personally sent me some documents that she knows that will help all of us together. So to say that she was excited about it and still is is an understatement.

>> I've finished the first class, the first semester and then I'm on the second one and we're on Week 7. So next week is our last week. But this is also like a test for me to see if I can go back to school and get an associate so I can one day become a QP because I would like to do that one day as well. I like that it breaks everything down into bite sized pieces. It's not overwhelming. And especially when we're already working, like I'm already working a full-time job, I'm a full-time mom. I want to be able to do this. But if it was too much at one time, then it would really contribute to the burnout that a lot of us experience. And a big thing is about the self-care, and trying to prevent burnout and recognizing when we need help and everything like that, which we do a really good job on. I feel like we pride ourselves on. You're always allowed to ask for a break if you need it, even just for a situation. And your health is important because you are taking care of our individuals. And if you're not okay, you're not going to be treating them okay.

>> Rachel and others, there are plenty of others that can work with certain people because they have this very -- they've honed in on these very specialized skills, but growing their roles, growing their character, and then being able to, you know, give back into the program.

>> I do feel like it has validated a lot of why I'm doing what I'm doing. And it showed me that there are a lot of other people that really do care about what we do as well. I think that, like, for personal boundaries and professionalism, I think we cover it really well from the DSP's perspective. However, I think it would be really good if we could cover it as to why it's so important for our individuals, because we're setting the tone and we're teaching them how we should act. And if we don't uphold that, we're doing them a disservice.

>> I know that she is learning skills or learning more of the skills, not that she didn't already know, about how to deal with, you know, a client that might have brought in, you know, something that's going on at their house that morning, how to deal with that. I watched Rachel just today and I always say stuff like this. I watched her just today doing things like that because she didn't know what she was going to get into working with a particular individual today. It's a little bit of a new thing that we just pulled her and needed her for. And I watched her brilliantly take care of that. But had she had not had the experience plus, you know, listening in her cohort or getting in the advanced training, that's a deer in the headlight kind of look. But she obviously knew that and she took accountability for I have to do something here and there is something that, you know, I'm going to have to pull out my skills. And she pulled out those skills. So that's nice to see. That really -- This -- I think this training and others like it supports the -- our priorities by investing in staff development in a way that directly enhances the quality, strengthens organizational values, and advances a long-term mission of empowering our individuals with developmental disabilities, empowering them with the independence that we are always teaching them. Our core values are trust, respect, honesty, and accountability. And if that -- If all of these things don't speak all of those words, I don't know what does.

>> So what recommendations would you have for a direct support professional that's interested in signing up and taking the advanced training courses?

>> To do it. Just do it. Absolutely. It's not going to harm you in any way. If anything, it's just going to add more tools to your tool belt.

[ Music ]

>> We're so thankful to have Rachel and Julie both be able to share their experiences with us and have such a positive light on it. One of the things that Julie -- or not Julie, but Rachel mentioned was her desire to become a QP, which is a qualified professional. And it's really exciting that the vision that we have for these courses leads into an opportunity for her to be able to do that. So next slide. And, Melissa, I'm going to ask or hand this over to you to sort of talk about this career ladder.

>> Thank you. And that's one of the things when we talk about speaking different languages or how we for -- by our mission as a community college system, sometimes differs from industry is when this first came to us, one of the conversations was, well, where does it lead? You know, what happens next? So we're always planning and trying to create intentional pathways at the community college system not just after people leave us, but before they come to us. One of the things we're looking at now is that we have 5,000 students in our -- And this is from our North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Five thousand students that state they want to be in some type of counseling or helping profession. So we have to think we've got to make some pipelines for these students and get them into the right pathway to come into our programs at the community college system and then find them a way to move on in whatever manner, if that's at a four year school, if that's in practice, what that's going to look like. And so when our faculty sat down with DHHS and they started having these conversations, it was, you know, they said these are our core competencies and now we're going to -- What is going to happen once they do this initial course and then the advanced training. So, again, always bringing in DSPs, always bringing in our industry folks, our faculty to kind of look, we have this standardized initial training and the employer provides that. And then this advanced training, which we built not in a silo or not in a vacuum, but with all these partners together, talking about with the diversity of the clients, the curriculum content, all driven by DSPs. And then these well-trained folks who, you know, they know the lingo, they understand the framework that they're working in. Because that's really important too, is not just that you're with that client but what is this framework? It's a bigger part of something. And so these well-trained DSPs, they're strengthening patient care because -- I mean, I don't even need to talk anymore because Rachel already did it for me between -- with her and the folks that she works with. But, you know, they have those skills now and they're [inaudible] that they don't feel -- they feel prepared. And, you know, a prepared person is going to be a much more confident person. And when we know when we're taking care of in healthcare with patients or with our clients, that they can feel that and they can feel that confidence. So that's a wonderful - - Just knowing that you have that confidence to perform your job well and make a difference in the lives of the people you're providing support to. And then we do something, we say tricky, that we tell them they finished these two eight-week courses and they get this time. And we say, well, guess what? On the non-credit side, if you complete these two courses, we're going to give you six hours of college credit to go towards our social and human services program. So that -- there's already that opportunity for advancement. And if you'll go to the next slide, please, we'll talk a little bit more about that, how that DSP advanced training, those two courses fit into the larger picture. So our prefixes are different on our continuing education or our non-credit side. And so we have the advanced course, 48 hours each, DDT-3110 core skills for supporting individuals with IDD. And then DDT-3120 advanced skills for DSPs.

If those are completed satisfactorily, then they can roll over or roll into and receive course credit, or we say crosswalk, into our social and human services degree pathway that has a certificate in intellectual and developmental disabilities. So this 12 hours -- So they're already getting three hours credit for DDT-110. They get three hours subject credit for DDT-120. They take 220 and 230 and they get a certificate in intellectual and developmental disabilities. They take -- So that ends up being 12 hours. They take 48 more hours with their gen eds and some highly specialized core training in human services education, and they've got an associate degree in social and human services. So this is -- We say we sneak it in there because some people may be like, oh, I don't like English or, just like Rachel said, I just don't know that I can do this. But when you start with something relevant, something they love, and then kind of say, look, you're earning college credit. You know, you can get that English class or take these other two DDT courses that are already in something that you're really enjoying. And then, hey, if you add on math, if you add on your English, if you add on a psychology class and really promote and support the students as they're going on this journey, then we can show them that the pipeline doesn't have to end at that training. It can. And you're going to become a really well-rounded professional. But if you want to keep going, there's those opportunities. And I think once we kind of showed that pathway, it was like, oh yeah, we love this. So we were very excited about that and that we did get buy-in from our friends over there at DHHS. And if you'll go to the next slide, I'll let Tina talk about some of our challenges that we did have, believe it or not. But Tina's going to talk about that a little bit more.

>> So one of the things I'll say is we were not a terribly hard sell, but also it's really important, you know, we're very much choice oriented. So I love the fact that we've created these choices for people to make for themselves. There's an opportunity to just get advanced training and to feel more confident in the job that you do, but also to be able to create this pathway into more, you know, a higher paying job. I also love that we're able to financially support a lot of folks to be able to do this. Because DSPs in North Carolina are underpaid everywhere, but for sure in North Carolina as well. So we did have a lot of challenges getting it off the ground though. One of the biggest things was that we talk -- we speak different languages, right? You know, it's one of those we were saying the same thing and we were using different words. So a lot of it was trying to figure out that we are, in fact, saying the same thing and just using different words and having an understanding. One of our folks from the community college, one of our partners over there was very good at being able to translate. So we were very fortunate to have her on board with us and sort of guide the language as the language needed to be guided. And then, you know, for the most part, there were some, you know, administrative challenges that kind of came up, sort of that contracting piece, which was really challenging. You know, a lot of things that you would think that would be very effortless were not. One of the things that I will say is that absolutely we did not face challenges with the actual curriculum.

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I think that that was one of the few things that we did find was just very easy. And I loved -- I love the fact that we had an opportunity to recognize that the DSPs had a lot of input into that work to be able to talk about, like, what was important to them. And there was a lot of different perspectives that went into the work itself. One of the things that we have found as we've now been running the courses, you know, we did not have the completion rate that we would have liked to have had with our first cohort in the fall. So there's been a lot of work into why did that happen? What do we need to be looking at? How can we provide more supports around that? And so, you know, we did add the synchronous course. We're waiting to kind of see how that lands. Melissa, you're going to have to correct me if I'm wrong, but I feel like that's wrapping up here shortly.

>> Yes. Yes. It is worth it. We're already at the end of the semester, so we're -- And our faculty are also great data collectors, so we have a lot of really good data based around that for sure. And what you said too is that these -- sometimes people just couldn't continue because they had life happen events. And so we have really robust wraparound supports at our colleges to kind of help folks that they want to keep going but maybe they need some additional assistance in other areas of their life. And so that helped as well.

>> It did. And it was a great opportunity for the staff to be able to reach out and then share that information with us as well. So that was amazing. So next slide. I think a good example of how you got to keep that collaboration going. So moving forward.

>> Okay. Oh, you may -- Oh, okay.

>> Ooh, go ahead. What do we have moving forward?

>> All right. Thank you, Tina. Well, we said we had really strong interest. As soon as this came out, we started having waiting lists and people were very excited. From our cohort data, we had 79 enrolled and 47 completed. So while that is, like she said, a little bit more - - You know, we wanted to have more completers but we understand that it was new, there's something -- For whatever reason, everybody couldn't complete. But I like to look on the bright side. We had 47 people complete in the fall. And then in spring, where we don't always see numbers in a lot of our classes because, you know, spring is just a different animal sometimes. But we have 23 enrolled and, again, some of those are those synchronous courses. And we're excited to hear about some of the feedback that we've received from that. Because, again, this is a continuous quality improvement. You know, we're continuing these cycles, what worked, what didn't work, making these improvements. And even though we're not bound contractually, we're still bound as partners in this work. And so they are very much a, you know, a sounding board and providing us feedback and helping our -- these courses become better every time.

And, Tina, do you want to talk about the sustainability considerations going forward?

>> I do. So the initial scholarships that we had for the courses, which made them free for enrollees, did actually come from a grant that the community colleges received. And, again, this is why I think it's so important that we're not working in silos is because they were able to access funds that we didn't even know were available. And so we have one-time funds that have not yet been fully expended to support the DSP workforce. So we are looking at being able to fund additional seats for DSPs moving forward. Again, going back to that contracting mechanism that creates the more challenges than pathways forward, so we're still working on that. We're also looking at being able to potentially provide training bonuses for DSPs that complete the course and then also continue to stay in the field. So we're trying to work through the process for that as well. In North Carolina, we have several other opportunities as people move into other roles and move forward. There's some -- the apprenticeship opportunities. There's also some loan repayment opportunities depending on what area you work in and what field you go into specifically. So, for sure, there's some other opportunities that are available to DSPs moving forward and the ability to build those out. So it's a work in progress. I think one of the best things that has come out of this is the fact that the silos are breaking down and we're all really starting to work together across the board. And it's not limited to us over here in the IDD space. It's not limited to the community colleges. And it's a great opportunity. If I had any -- Like Rachel's advice, just do it, just do it. So I think we have some room for questions, maybe.

>> Do we have questions?

>> Oh. Well, yes. And there is no shortage of questions in our --

>> Oh.

>> -- Q&A box. So people are very interested in, you know, what you all have been talking about. So let's see here. There's like 11 questions here. I'm -- We'll try to get to as many as we can. Christina asks do any North Carolina state agencies have baseline qualification requirements for providers of services, supported employment, Medicaid services, et cetera, where it may have taken into consideration if the training would help meet those requirements?

>> So, yes, agencies do have requirements that they need to meet as far as, like, different types of training for different services that they're providing. The DSPs have their baseline training that everybody has to receive, and it's not very prescriptive as far as what is required.

So we are currently looking at being able to provide a high standard basic training curriculum that would be available to anybody who wanted to take it, even if they were ultimately not going to become a DSP, to remove the training burden and cost off of providers, and also ensure the quality of the training that's provided.

>> Thank you. Wel, here's another question for the folks in North Carolina. What strategies can be used to help maintain momentum when multiple agencies are involved, especially because, you know, there's limited capacity that people have? So what have you guys noticed has helped maintain that momentum for you all?

>> Melissa, do you want to take that one first?

>> Sure. Well, I think one of the really good things that's happened is that we -- the silos have broken down and we're in on a lot of the same committees together. So when you see somebody more often, it's more likely that you're going to have those conversations. But we just have a really dedicated group of people across the agencies that are just making sure that it doesn't fall by the wayside. We have full support of the secretary, of our governor, you know, to grow this workforce. And we have actually an edict to increase the direct support professionals, the direct care workers in our state, and to provide them, you know, the opportunities to grow in their role. So I think that it's -- the state supports it. The -- We're top down and from bottom up. So I think that's -- Just knowing that everybody's on the same page with the same vision really helps the work to continue.

>> I agree, Melissa. And this work is also included in the governor's strategic plan as well as being in the secretary's strategic plan, which does actually support it and drive it forward.

>> That's awesome. Yeah. I don't know a single state that doesn't have a need for direct support professionals. There's -- The need is really strong. So I'm really glad that you're able to get that from the top. So I saw this question and it made me think of the video with Rachel, which I love that video, by the way, especially because I was once a direct support professional who worked at a day program so. But I -- The person asks what supports can help the DSP succeed in their coursework, especially if they're working full-time? So if you're like, you're a mom, you're working full-time, how are you able to help people really be able to finish and, you know, make it over the finish line?

>> Well, my understanding is is that the community college system has a lot of wraparound supports for folks. I do think some of it is asking about and letting folks know that you need them. But, Melissa, if you can share some of the stuff that you all have.

>> Well -- And one of the things is almost like day one, creating that sense of belonging. And that's just ingrained in our mission across all community colleges and really helping the cohorts feel like they belong together. But then letting them know at the colleges, we have these opportunities if you need this. But also learning about study skills, time management, and -- Plus, intentionally creating these courses in a design that, you know, caters to folks that it is eight weeks, that they are -- You know, that it's very mapped according to the objectives. So they're learning what they need to learn. And just that relevance, I think that helps. But we do -- You know, if people have car trouble, if they need food, if they're having difficulties with their internet, there's all these different things that we have funding at colleges that can support that. And, you know, that's -- Sometimes everybody has the desire. It's just to -- that catalyst. And we recognize that in North Carolina, especially since 2020. And we've really developed these wraparound services at all of our colleges to help people that want to be successful to be successful.

>> Absolutely. I've heard it being called the whatever it takes mentality. Whatever needs are around, we're going to do that so people can succeed. That's awesome. Thank you. All right. So a couple more questions here and then I want to bring in the other presenters for some questions I think that they would be good for. What specific credentials, so someone says specific so I'm assuming they mean they want to know about certain credentials, that would benefit DSPs in terms of ongoing professional development.

>> You want to take that, Tina?

>> Yeah, I'm not sure I understand the question though.

>> I'm guessing they're thinking about maybe like NADSP or is there, like, a specific, like, certificate or?

>> So we don't have that in North Carolina, like a specific certificate.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> Which I think -- And one of the issues that we're working very hard to address is that because our core competency training, that training that you have to have in order to be a DSP for everybody. When a provider provides the training, they have the opportunity to not give that training to the person who took it. So they hold that training. And for a provider who's paying for that, sometimes you don't want to give that up because then your DSP moves to another agency or you move to another field or something. So one of the things that we are working very hard on is making sure that the training that's provided is recognized, and portable, and belongs to the DSP that is receiving the training. Which I don't think was something that DSPs that we initially started talking to really recognized as being important.

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Because they just change agencies and they get the training again. And we just want them to recognize you're doing the work, you should get the training. When you go to the community college, that certificate is in your name. That is your training. That's yours. It is yours to move forward with. It's yours to take with you. You know, I have a master's degree. It has my name on it. Nobody takes it away from me. You know, it's that kind of thing and that recognition of the professionalism which becomes so important. So, for sure, being able to provide those credentials that are required, and high standard, and also focus on providing those services and supports for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

>> Awesome, thank you. All right. We've got a few more questions. I think I want to -- One of them I think I want to bring Leah in to talk about because I think she might be able to speak well to this. What are some practical ways American Job Centers and maybe even workforce boards could introduce DSP career pathways to customers who may not be familiar with the field? I know we've talked about recognition, so I thought maybe you could answer that.

>> Sure, I'm glad to. And that's a really relevant question because I'm guessing most of the folks on today's webinar are very familiar with the DSP profession. That's probably why you ended up here today. But there is still a lot of work to be done in building awareness that this is really a field, this is a career where you can start here, you can continue to grow and advance working as a DSP. Or you can start as a DSP and go into social work. You can go into being a career counselor. There are so many doors that are open to you. And I think some of the ways that I might advise someone sitting in an AJC with a job seeker in front of them and they're wondering how to sort of introduce this profession, I think I'd suggest two things. The first is whether they want to use our tool, we'd love them to, or not. You know, of course we'd love that. But really emphasizing the wide range of skills that somebody builds doing this work. And that if you're someone who has a sense that perhaps you like working with people, you like supporting people, you want to go into one of these helping professions, but maybe you don't quite know exactly where you want to end up in your career ultimately. This can actually be a really effective and productive sort of exploration opportunity for you. So I might emphasize the really multifaceted nature of working as a DSP. And I would also suggest some of what Tina and Melissa spoke about in really sort of meeting job seekers where they are, identifying the particular things that they like, that they enjoy, and pulling on those threads, whether it doesn't at first seem like sort of a professional aspiration, even if it's that sort of personal connection.

I've always liked, you know, supporting people, caring, all of these kinds of traits are some of the best kind of ways to open that door to working as a DSP. And then the last thing I'd offer, particularly for someone who is sitting in an AJC, is to think about and really do a little bit of research about all of the resources that are available within your community that could support someone who wants to enter the field, whether there is a registered apprenticeship opportunity in your region, or there's an amazing program like there is in North Carolina that has this connection to higher education. Really making sure that you're versed on what all of those funding sources, those resources, those opportunities are for that job seeker sitting in front of you, which can also help them to make some of those decisions. So that's what I would say.

>> Thank you, Leah. I 100 percent agree. And those of you that are in the workforce development space, direct support professional is a great job for people who need work right now, need flexible hour skills, and want to advance. So it is a great career to talk to people about. Thank you, Leah. All right. So before we wrap up, I wanted to bring Nicole in because I think there's a couple of questions here that she might be able to answer. And someone was -- You had mentioned about technology at the end about AI. So somebody popped in with a question right away. So I thought I would ask you. With home-based care becoming increasingly technology enabled, how are workforce development programs thinking about assessing and validating digital care readiness in addition to traditional caregiving skills? So at least in, like, direct care space, how are employers and businesses really preparing and equipping people to have those skills?

>> Yeah, I actually think this is an emerging conversation. So I don't think that there is a uniform answer, along with so many things that we deal with in our field. What I do hear from the states that we work with and some from our partners is that this is something that they are starting to get questions about, that they're beginning to sort of embrace, not only internally and how [inaudible] state handles it, but also what does this mean for the direct care workforce and can it be leveraged to act as a workforce multiplier? So I think this is very early on in the conversation, but I would add that many providers, so, like, folks who are contracted to provide the care, are already integrating these systems into their workflow. They are already using AI as it relates to scheduling, monitoring clients, monitoring staff training. They are using these kinds of tools. I don't know that we're seeing it yet rolled out to verify sort of staff understanding at that level. But I think that we will start to see that over the next 12 to 18 months.

>> Yeah, I definitely agree with you. Thank you. And on that other side of that, if you are a business that employs direct support professionals and you want to make sure that they have more digital literacy, see if your community has digital navigators, trained digital navigators.

Many WIOA programs now are offering digital literacy and AI literacy programs. And there was the recent TEGE from the Employment and Training Administration encouraging people to help job seekers learn those skills. So there are resources available in your community. So -- Because I agree with Nicole, it's going to become -- It is an emerging issue. All right, we are close to ending. I'm trying to see if there's any more questions that didn't get answered. But I feel like most of these were pretty much answered. I don't know if anybody had any closing thoughts they wanted to share. I know we're -- we've only got a few more minutes.

>> Hi, this is Melissa. I would just say don't be afraid to reach across to meet with other folks in your areas. And don't be afraid to fail at first or not understand. Like Tina said, just the lingo sometimes is overwhelming. And we would -- We all agreed we'd take a break and say, okay, this is what we mean. And this is -- You almost need to have a page of definitions so everybody knows. And to -- And you have a training in mind, but think beyond that. I love -- I'm going to steal that chart, sorry, with all the circles. Not sorry. But I love that because there's -- You know, you can go as far as your imagination and we already have youth apprenticeships, apprenticeship opportunities that we're working along the way. So I would say don't be afraid to just start having those conversations. And maybe you have a goal in mind, but if the goal changes, be okay with it and just kind of be fluid, and keep moving, and then keep progressing.

>> Thank you, Melissa. That was excellent. I really appreciate those words. And, yeah, I really appreciate all of the presenters that came on today. I'm going to very quickly, if you want to go to the next slides, just mention that if you heard some things today that piqued your interest and you are looking to support direct support professionals, we are here to help you. Again, within 10 business days, we will have the webinar recording. It will have the transcript, the recording and presentation materials, including the resources we shared today. And some of them were also shared in the chat, the infographic, the information on registered apprenticeships, and the memorandum on advancing DSP career pathways. Next slide. And so before we close out, the LEAD Center is a WIOA Technical Assistance Center that's funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy, the Department of Labor. We help workforce development professionals, American Job Centers, workforce boards, people in that WIOA space to make sure that people with disabilities are being served. So we want to help increase career pathways for people with disabilities. To ensure employers have skilled workers. We support financial literacy training and economic self-sufficiency. Improving coordination and collaboration of the workforce development system as a whole and its partners contributing to a more effective system. And so with that said, go to the next slide, we offer options for universal, targeted, and intensive technical assistance for free to state agencies, American Job Centers, WIOA partners.

And the technical assistance that LEAD Center provides can help teams improve employment outcomes, strengthen data-driven planning, build skills needed to support individuals with a wide range of disability experiences. So if your organization is considering some technical assistance or you think you could use some support in this area, we recommend you come to our website. There's a QR code there and the link to the website should be added into the chat. And you can inquire with us, and we will get back to you and try to find a way to meet your needs. So I would highly recommend that. And that's not all you could find on the LEAD Center website. So if you'd go to the next slide. We have a plethora of information on the LEAD Center website, so I'd highly encourage you to visit us at [leadcenter.org](http://leadcenter.org). Please sign up for our updates when you find out about our latest webinars, materials that we're sharing. And, of course, we recommend that you follow us on all of the social medias, Facebook, X, LinkedIn, YouTube. Again, this recording will be available in about 10 business days along with the materials. And, with that said, I really want to say I appreciate everyone who came on to join us today. Thank you to Nicole at the Direct Care Strategies Workforce Center. Thank you to Tina and Melissa in North Carolina. Thank you to Leah with Social Policy Research. And thank you to Shelley with the Office of Disability Employment Policy. And everyone who has supported today's webinar. I wish you all a great rest of your day. Thank you.

>> Thank you.