

POLICY RESEARCH BRIEF

THE DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE AND COVID-19: LOW WAGES AND RACIAL DISPARITIES

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Research Issue

There is a critical shortage of direct support professionals (DSPs) who support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to live in the community. The national turnover rate for this workforce is 51% and vacancies are 15-20% depending on the position (2019 NCI Staff Stability Survey Report). DSPs support people in a variety of areas (employment, daily living, relationship building, health, wellness, to name a few) and their work involves a high level of skill. However, the high-skilled and varied nature of this work is not reflected in DSPs' wages, which remain low. The overwhelming majority of DSPs are primary wage earners in their home.

DSPs who choose to support people with IDD are predominately women (83%) and are often people of color and recent immigrants. COVID-19 has shined a light on the importance of this workforce and the critical role they play in our community. People with IDD are at higher risk of getting infected with COVID-19 and dying of it. During the pandemic, many DSPs have been providing care to people with IDD who had COVID-19. This puts them at high risk every day. Yet less than a third received wage augmentations due to the pandemic. As our study showed, there may be racial disparities in hour wage, household income, and additional hours worked.

Key Findings

Only 30% in each racial group reported that they got extra pay due to COVID risks



Hourly wages before pandemic



\$13.57

Black/African American DSPs



\$13.98

White DSPs



\$14.19

Other DSPs*

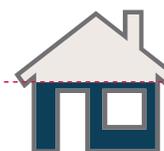
*Other DSPs include American Indian/Native American, Asian, other, 2 or more race groups

Household income under \$40,000



59%

Black/African American DSPs



41%

White DSPs



58%

Other DSPs*

*Other DSPs include American Indian/Native American, Asian, other, 2 or more race groups

Worked 16+ additional hours



43% Black/African American DSPs



26% White DSPs



32% Other DSPs*

*Other DSPs include American Indian/Native American, Asian, other, 2 or more race groups

Study Background

For the vast majority of DSPs, staying home during the COVID-19 pandemic is not an option. The National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP) and the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration (ICI) staff wanted to hear directly from DSPs about their experiences in supporting people with disabilities during this period. In response, ICI developed an online survey and collaborated with NADSP to reach DSPs from across the country. Its intent is to inform effective policy and practice decisions about what is needed and to better prepare for potential future waves of this or other pandemics. The initial survey was launched in April 2020 and was completed by 8,914 participants from across the country. A six-month follow-up survey was launched in November 2020 and completed by 8,846 participants. Data sighted in this Brief are from the six-month follow-up survey. A full description of the study and findings can be found at z.umn.edu/dsp-covid19.

A 12-month follow-up survey will be fielded in June 2021 and focus on vaccinations, return to work, and social inclusion.

Policy Recommendations

It is critical that systemic challenges of high turnover, high vacancies, low wages, disparities in wages among racial groups, and the effects these challenges have on the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities be addressed through significant policy change. This includes —

- Official identification of DSPs as essential workers. Access to essential worker status and pay may give DSPs childcare and financial support needed to remain in their jobs.
- Professional recognition and wage equity for DSPs. DSPs have always provided critical, essential supports for the millions of Americans with disabilities. The low average wage of DSPs is not reflective of the skilled nature and varied responsibilities of their work.
- Equity issues identified for Black/African American DSPs with regard to wages must be explored and resolved. The wage differences between Black/African American participants and white/other participants and the reality that they were also more likely to be the primary wage earner in their household and had lower household incomes likely contributes to their need to work more hours.

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Research cited: Hewitt, A., Pettingell, S., Kramme, J., Smith, J., Dean, K., Kleist, B., Sanders, M., & Bershady, J. (2021). *Direct support workforce and COVID-19 national report: Six-month follow-up*. Minneapolis: Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota.

Policy Research Brief: z.umn.edu/rctprb

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