

Alternative Approach to Recruitment and Retention

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The crisis

The demand for Direct Support Professionals has continued to increase, as people with intellectual disability are living longer and as members of the Baby Boomer generation are entering the years in which supports are increasingly likely. The supply of Direct Support Professionals has not been able to keep up with this increased demand. In fact, the President's Committee on People with Intellectual Disabilities (2018) has described the current situation as a workforce crisis. Turnover rates within the intellectual disability field are currently in the range of 40% per year, and roughly 20% of all Direct Support Professional positions are currently vacant (Spreat, 2019a). Historically, these values fluctuate, becoming worse when the economy improves and other jobs become available. Yet even under the most challenging economic conditions, the rates of turnover and open positions have remained unacceptably high.

High turnover rates and high percentages of open positions have impact in other areas. Overtime costs are excessive because unlike most retail businesses, provider agencies must ensure appropriate levels of support and supervision. Given the needs of the individuals being supported, providers cannot safely work short-staffed. The excessive overtime has the obvious negative budgetary impact, but it threatens the quality of services and supports that we provide. Staff working overtime may be tired, and sometimes they are assigned to work with consumers with whom they are unfamiliar, thus jeopardizing the relationships that form the basis of our services. Perhaps an even greater threat is that in face of high turnover and vacancy rates, employers have to become less selective in hiring Direct Support Professionals.

The cause

The imbalance between supply of Direct Support Professionals and the demand for these employees suggests a causal factor (Pittenger, 2017). Economists admonish that when prices (i.e., costs of Direct Support Professionals) are in any way constrained, it is likely that shortages will follow. If Direct Support Professional pay is somehow not allowed to fluctuate in response

to demand, there will be shortages of Direct Support Professionals. It is interesting to note that the University of Minnesota Center for Integration Studies (Larson, Lakin, & Bruininks, 1998) has earlier demonstrated empirically that the cause of turnover was low pay. In a sense, this is an empirical demonstration of the negative impact of price controls.

Direct Support Professional wages are indeed constrained. Most of an intellectual disability provider agency's budget is devoted to the costs of Direct Support Professionals. Figures as high as 70-80% have been reported. Yet, unlike Home Depot, provider agencies cannot simply raise their prices so that they might pay their Direct Support Professionals a living wage. The providers cannot raise taxes like school boards, nor can they raise their prices like most other businesses. They have no control over their prices because prices in the intellectual disability field are typically set by the purchaser of the services - some governmental agency. The government does not directly constrain Direct Support Professional wages, but they limit the revenue potential for provider agencies, and this limitation ultimately ensures poor wages for Direct Support Professionals.

Government fixed prices appear to be designed to ensure that the sustainability of intellectual disability provider agencies is always in question. For example, Spreat (2019b) reported that in each of five studied years, approximately 1/3 of all providers had expenses that exceeded revenues. He also reported that the average operating margin $((\text{Revenue} - \text{Expenses})/\text{Revenue})$ was only 1.5%. An operating margin of from 3% to 5% is generally considered to be healthy in a non-profit (Harrison & Montalvo, 2002). The field is maintained on starvation wages, and this impacts the pay that is possible for Direct Support Professionals. Pay, in turn affects the ability to recruit and retain qualified employees, and ultimately impacts on the quality of services.

The history of governmental underfunding has been noted in several places. Amy Hewitt (2013) has suggested that the underfunding is so pervasive and so longstanding, that it is improper to suggest that there is a workforce crisis because crisis implies some sort of emergent problem. Underfunding, on the other hand, is simply the way of life in intellectual disability. Spreat (in press) has illustrated the extent to which Intellectual Disability funding has lagged behind inflation and general government spending. In Pennsylvania, government spending went up over 90% over a recent 22 year period, while ID spending increased only 23%. The distinction between the term, "crisis," and the standard order of business in the intellectual disability field is perhaps moot. Providers are unable to attract and retain a sufficient number of qualified Direct Support Professionals.

Possible remedies

The rallying cry within the intellectual disability field has been to pay Direct Support Professionals a living wage, and there has been some modest movement in this direction. In Pennsylvania, for example, intense lobbying efforts were followed by a modest increase in intellectual disability funding, which enable about 90% of providers to offer raises to Direct Support Professionals (Spreat, 2019a). But the issue of concern is not really what Direct Support Professionals are being paid, but rather the ability of provider agencies to hire sufficient quantities of qualified applicants for the job. In Pennsylvania's case, the increased wages appeared to have been offset by improvements to the economy. No appreciable improvements in turnover or vacancy rate were noted (Spreat, 2019a).

The role of litigation to increase rates for services provided seems to have been dismissed in the recent *Armstrong v. Exceptional Child Center* lawsuit (2015). Some suggest (Thaler, 2017) that things will improve once the boomer generation dies off. This logic would seem to discourage legislators from taking any significant actions. Perhaps provider agencies would be wise to develop Political Action Committees and use those funds in an effort to persuade legislators. Others suggest that robots will become the DSP of the future. Until that time, provider agencies must try to continue to survive.

Modest wage increases may be possible through legal lobbying and educational efforts, but rate increases of 2-3% per year will not enable the field to overcome the roughly 67% lag behind governmental spending referenced above. The conditions described above are bleak, and one must reasonably wonder whether the intellectual disability field will be able to sustain. More funds from the government seem unlikely. An influx of qualified individuals who want to become Direct Support Professionals seems unlikely under current conditions. How are we to face the challenge of supporting and serving individuals who have intellectual disability?

An Alternative Remedy

One approach to address this problem involves a re-conceptualization of the Direct Support Professional position. There are those for whom the Direct Support Professional job is a wonderful life long career, and there are those for whom the Direct Support Professional position is a stepping stone to another career. It appears unlikely that we can make the position itself a more attractive live long endeavor, but perhaps we can make it a more interesting stepping stone by providing staff with a variety of professional growth opportunities.

Education Options - Bogenschutz, Nord, and Hewitt (2015) have reported that that increased, specialized training can reduce turnover. It is possible to make this additional training to improve the general knowledge and skill set of the Direct Support Professionals. Rather than focusing on the development of Direct Support Professional skills, instruction can be provided that has a legitimate external validity to the world outside of intellectual disability.

Woods Services first noticed this during the nursing shortage of about 10-12 years ago. Unable to find a sufficient number of nurses, Woods was forced to hire and train technicians to deliver medications. The remaining nurses handled all medical duties, while these new staff passed the medications. The technicians were nested within the nursing department and worked in direct cooperation with nurses. Many started to attend nursing classes at the nearby community college, and to date, 14 of the technicians have earned nursing degrees and licenses. Eight have elected to stay with Woods, including two individuals who now hold Nursing management positions. Note that existing benefits package paid for a portion of the costs of becoming a nurse. The development of new nurses at Woods resulted in marked professional growth for the former technicians. It suggested other avenues for educational intervention.

More recently, Woods entered partnerships with local colleges and universities to develop and offer coursework for employees. A partnership was established with Harcum College to an Associate's Degree program for a cohort of Woods employees. The initial cohort consisted of 12 employees, and two recently graduated. The Harcum program now has 25 employees enrolled, and an additional six will graduate in May. Plans are underway to support these graduates to attain their Bachelor's Degrees under a similar model. A second partnership was

developed with the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine to offer a Master's Degree program in Non-profit Leadership and Population Health Management. Senior level staff from Woods teach more than half of the courses in this program, thus significantly reducing the costs of the program. This program was targeted for employees identified as potential leaders. It will graduate 23 employees this summer, with another 25 employees beginning a cohort in Fall 2020.

It must be recognized that some of our graduates will leave Woods, but it seems likely that they will go on to make contributions in our field. More importantly, 90% of our enrolled students have remained Woods employees throughout their schooling, and it is anticipated that most will remain through their contractually obligated two year post graduation period. Note that the comparable retention rate for Woods employees not involved in the education program is 73% per year. This latter figure means that two year turnover for employees not involved in educational programs would be about 54%. This is the figure that is comparable to the 90% retention of those in educational programs.

A third educational option is relatively new to Woods, having become operational about five months ago. The growth of Woods' school programs was limited by the difficulty in hiring appropriately credentialed special education teachers. Individuals who hold bachelor's degrees can obtain temporary teaching credentials, but must work to obtain full credentials. Woods encouraged staff with bachelor's degrees to seek temporary teaching certification, and Woods, in turn, supports them to obtain coursework necessary to make their credentials permanent. There are currently four individuals involved in this program, and 14 additional employees are in the enrollment process and anticipate starting classes in Fall 2020.

The point to take is that while education can be used to increase performance in the job that an individual currently holds, it can also be used to increase that individual's general life preparation. Woods tends to keep employees who are engaged in educational programs.

Motivational Opportunities – Woods is a large organization, and despite a general openness on the part of management, it can be easy for staff to feel relatively unimportant. To invite increased engagement with Woods, their jobs, and their career, Woods instituted a social innovations competition in each of the last three years. Groups of employees were encouraged to develop proposals that would describe actions that would improve program quality. These groups, or teams, were to develop a formal proposal with a working budget. This proposal would be presented to a panel of judges comprised of senior officers of Woods. Judges would offer feedback and select the most promising of the proposals for funding. Funding came largely from the company's endowment.

Over the past three years, Woods has funded ten proposals submitted by staff. Among the funded projects were projects that increased employability of clients, taught individuals gardening skills, marketed Woods products to the general public, and reduced costs of client travel. Perhaps more important than the actual projects, staff were encouraged to voice recommendation on how to improve Woods. In a sense, they became involved in the actual leadership of the program.

Conclusion

Efforts to increase Direct Support Professional wages must continue, but these efforts need to be supplemented by non-economic actions that assist the employees to develop and enhance their readiness for higher level employment. This sort of action appears to retain employees longer, and with appropriate marketing, will attract new employees to the organization. Both recruitment and retention can be enhanced. The downside of this approach is that some employees will eventually move to jobs outside of the organization. That will be a tolerable loss as these employees will have assisted in the development of the employees that elect to remain. The approach will make employment as a Direct Support Professional with Woods an attractive stepping stone.

This approach may encourage some employees to move on to other jobs, but others will remain with us at higher levels of responsibility. Their success will ultimately make the Direct Support Professional job more attractive to potential employees. Admittedly, the position itself will continue to be undercompensated, BUT, the Direct Support Professionals will be afforded opportunities to learn and grown, and in a sense, to achieve their potential.

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