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Office of Integrated Health – Health Supports Network Health & Safety Alert/Information

Direct Support Professionals (DSP): The Cornerstone of the Care Team

What is a DSP?

People who provide day-to-day supports and who are employed by provider agencies in the Commonwealth’s Medicaid Waiver system, may be referred to by many different names such as, direct care staff, direct support provider, direct support worker, residential counselor, daily living specialist, relief staff, direct service worker, developmental disabilities specialist, home care aides, and various other unofficial titles.

The Direct Support Professional (DSP) and DSP Supervisor Developmental Disabilities (DD) Waiver Orientation and Competencies Protocol, dated March 6, 2020, published by Provider Development at the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services states:

A DSP is defined under the DD waivers in Virginia as:

“Direct support professional,” “direct care staff,” or “DSP” means staff members identified by the provider as having the primary role of assisting an individual on a day-to-day basis with routine personal care needs, social support, and physical assistance in a wide range of daily living activities so that the individual can lead a self-directed life in his own community. This term shall exclude consumer-directed staff and services facilitation providers” (23).

DSP’s are a critical piece of the deinstitutionalization of individual’s with intellectual and developmental disabilities (DD) in the United States (1) (4). They are vital to the care and wellbeing of individuals with IDD living in the community and are the cornerstone of the provider agency’s care team (11).





According to The Direct Care Workers Fact Report published in 2021, the direct care occupation is the fastest growing job field in the United States (15) (4). The demand for DSP's is predicted to add 1 million new jobs between 2019 - 2029 (1) (15).

Statistical reports show the majority of direct support professionals (DSPs) are women, people of color and immigrants. A high percentage of them have a least one child at home and or other dependents who rely on their income. These caregivers are often times at increased risk themselves of experiencing discrimination and inequities related to education, housing and employment (15) (4). Nearly 45% of DSPs live close to the poverty level in comparison to only 10.5% of workers within the general workforce (18) (26).

Lower hourly wages, part time hours requiring many to work several overlapping jobs totaling more than 40-hour work weeks, the lack of their own affordable housing, and health insurance can be pointed to as causes impacting the current staffing shortages and high turnover rates within the home care industry (15) (4). Although it is difficult to put a price on the value of caring, increased wages would lighten the impact of the financial strain and the emotional stress DSP's experience.

Job Duties and Responsibilities in Virginia

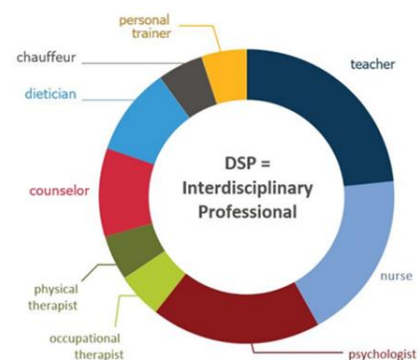
The primary focus of a Waiver DSP is to assist and support individuals with DD to live as independently as possible within their communities. This means the DSP may be required to support an individual with DD at home, at day program, at work, and many other situations and venues within their communities (e.g. PCP visits). DSP job duties may be numerous, and varied. Their duties are based on the level of supports required by the particular individual or individuals they provide care for within the agency where they are employed (11) (4). A DSP may provide care to one or several individuals throughout the day, depending on the setting or situation (home, day program, etc.)

Waiver DSPs are required to develop their person-centered thinking skills, which helps them get to know and understand what is important to the individuals they support. Person-centered thinking involves the ability to listen to individual's needs, wants and desires, then assist them in fulfilling their dreams on a daily basis (11) (24) (4).

This might necessitate communicating in unconventional ways, depending on the abilities of those they are supporting. The DSP is responsible for consistently supporting the individuals, acting as a positive role model, and advocating in the decision-making process for the individual (24) (28).

The list below is a summary of the responsibilities of a DSP:

- Maintaining the health and safety needs of the individual (within the agency's care), being knowledgeable about CPR and first aid training, in order to respond to emergency situations appropriately.
- Assisting with activities involving nutritional needs such as grocery shopping, meal planning, budgeting, and meal preparation.
- Following the medical orders of the Primary Care Provider (PCP) related to dietary needs, food and drink modifications, and mealtime supports.
- Assisting with basic personal hygiene tasks such as bathing, dressing, brushing teeth, nail care, and using the restroom.
- Scheduling, driving, attending, and supporting individuals to healthcare and dental appointments, (or other appointments).
- Assisting with medication administration of all drugs and treatments (which requires 32 hours of additional training in medication administration), according to Virginia Code.
- Having an awareness and knowledge regarding health conditions affecting the individual's daily health and safety by safety and respond appropriately when changes in condition are observed.
- Assist with management of the individual's home to include general cleaning of living spaces, doing laundry, making beds and or any other care of the individuals living areas might need.
- Have knowledgeable of the individual's Individual Support Plans (ISP) and instructions necessary for successful outcomes.
- Recognize behaviors which are a form of communication, following behavior support plans and provide interventions for safety.
- Complete daily documentation or data collection accurately.
- Assist the individual with interactions involving their family, friends, neighbors and others within the community and to develop the skills that support the person's needs, desires and ISP.
- Support the individual in participating in community activities which represent the individual's personal interests.
- Model good communication skills and a healthy lifestyle while developing trust and offering emotional support to the individual (24).



DSP Training Requirements in the Commonwealth

Direct Support Professionals are **not** required to be state board licensed or certified in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Requirements for provider agencies licensed by DBHDS are outlined in [Chapter 105. Rules and Regulations for Licensing Providers by the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services](#) (35), which covers topics such as human rights regulations, person-centered thinking, and infection control practices and many more.

Information about requirements around training in CPR and First Aid can be found within 12VAC35-105-440.

When changes are proposed to regulations in Virginia, which includes a meetings calendar and board minutes is contained on the [Virginia Regulatory Town Hall](#) website. The website also facilitates public participation through online comment forums and an email notification service.

If the DSP will be assisting individuals with medications then a 32-hour medication administration training may be required. [The Virginia Board of Nursing](#) approves the medication administration curriculums to be utilized and [medication administration guidance documents](#) can be found on their website. *DSP's should never assist an individual with medications prior to passing an approved course.*

The Direct Support Professional Orientation Manual for DSPs in Virginia is located online at [The Virginia Commonwealth University \(VCU\) Partnership for People with Disabilities DSP Orientation](#) and contains 6 sections for skill building. Each section has a checklist, and requires a final test.

The [Supplemental Training and Competencies](#) section topics are linked below for your easy reference.

**At Virginia Town Hall, click on "view document text"*

National CMS Initiative

The Centers for Medicaid & Medicare Services (CMS) funded research, development, and validation of a set of core competencies for the direct service workforce (DSW) through the National Direct Service Workforce Resource Center (DSW RC) starting in 2011 (13).

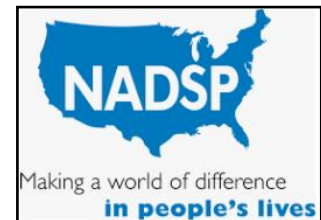
Through the creation of a national set of core competencies the mission of CMS was to assist states in taking a comprehensive and standardized approach to education and training of the direct services workforce (DSW), like DSPs. The DSW core competencies are considered a best practice framework of how to deliver direct support in the

community. The main goal of the DSW core competencies is supporting individuals with any type of disability to live meaningful integrated lives within their communities (13).

To learn more about the core competencies and the Medicaid DSW Workforce Initiative, please visit: <https://www.medicaid.gov/medicaid/long-term-services-supports/direct-care-workforce/dsw-core-competency-project/index.html>

Movement Toward DSP Certification

Currently the only national organization which issues DSP certification is [The National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals \(NADSP\)](#). The NADSP is a national association which recognizes the value and contributions of direct support professionals and offers membership to those employed in, and or, closely associated with the profession. DSP's, provider organizations, support coordinators as well as unpaid family caregivers can all become members.



The NADSP offers a variety of membership options from the individual DSP to large agencies. An annual membership for a single person starts at \$10.00, and also includes an avenue to receive a national DSP certification.

The NADSP has developed specific programs and services to promote professional development opportunities for DSPs within the United States. Their Community Residential Core Competencies (CRCC) covers topics such as household management, health and wellness, organizational participation, documentation, consumer empowerment, assessment, advocacy, community and service networking, building and maintaining friendships and relationships, communication, and crisis intervention.

The NADSP CRCC competencies ensure DSP's are learning skills through evidence-based practices to improve their knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to successfully support the individuals with DD in the community (12). To learn more about the NADSP DSP certification process visit their website at <https://nadsp.org/>

Professional Development

Due to the complex nature of the DSPs job responsibilities and their critical role in supporting individuals with IDD to live successful integrated lives, it is crucial they receive opportunities for training and continuing education which could lead to professional development. While there are no current federal minimum training requirements for DSP's, it is recommended that career pathways, which would provide DSP's the opportunity to increase competency and knowledge, be established (1).

There are career advancement options available to DSPs which don't require additional education:

- Becoming an assistant on-site manager.
- An on-site house manager.
- Advancement into a supervisor's role (19).

Other career options which involve continuing education at the technical school or college level include:

- Certificated Nursing Assistant (CNA).
- Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN).
- Registered Nurse (RN).
- Certified Career/Job Coach.
- Medicaid services care coordinator.
- Social Worker.
- Therapist (various) (19).

Hiring a DSP

DSP job postings are agency specific, but most state the minimum education level, minimum age, physical lifting requirements, a valid state driver's license. Requirements for background checks can be found in Chapter 105 (35).

Job Satisfaction

Providing care and support to an individual with IDD is deeply gratifying and rewarding for many people. Many DSPs report a sense of self-pride and fulfillment in completing their work, pleasure in developing close intimate relationships with the individuals in their care, being part of the excitement and satisfaction of an individual's growth process when experiencing new and different opportunities in the community (16) (9).

Considering the benefits and challenges of the DSP role when pursuing the career path is important. While the role of DSP can be physically and emotionally challenging at times there are many benefits to the profession as well.

Benefits of the DSP role:

- In great demand (9).
- No degree required, certification option is available.

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- Participation in various field trips, arts & crafts, and community activities with individuals.
 - Opportunities to learn new skills such as cooking, budgeting, household management, management of medications, proper use and maintenance of Durable Medical Equipment (DME), use of a wheelchair lift, etc.
 - Opportunities to learn about household safety such as fire safety, managing an emergency, and infection control to ensure those being cared for are living the most inclusive life possible.

Challenges of the DSP role:

- Psychological challenges, particularly when caring for individuals with behavioral challenges.
- Increased levels of work-related stress, anxiety, burnout and feelings of depersonalization, irritation, and emotional exhaustion (9).
- High turnover rates and lack of DSP workforce, significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (9).
- Low financial compensation.
- Limited benefits.
- Lacking employee appreciation (12).

When considering a position as a DSP, there are a few things to consider to ensure a higher level of job satisfaction. During the interview process ask for a realistic description of a day on the job, this is called a job preview. The purpose of a job preview is to provide the candidate with a realistic account of job duties and expectations. It also helps to develop mutual trust between the candidate for hire and the employer. This helps lower turnover rates, and also increases staff retention and job satisfaction (37).

Staff retention can be directly related to job satisfaction. According to the Relias 2021 DSP Survey, 23.9% of the 679 respondents were dissatisfied with their current employer. Reasons for dissatisfaction ranged from “not feeling appreciated” to “not feeling supported”. Unfair compensation was reported in 34.5% of the responses (17).

DSP’s have recently been recognized as essential workers. However, wages do not accurately reflect the importance of their contributions with integrating individuals with IDD into the community. Staff continue to be low wage earners with little to no additional compensation such as healthcare, sick leave and/or paid vacation time (18). The salary range for the DSP in Virginia is between \$20,553 - \$22,020, with the average salary being \$21,556 (38).

The following suggestions for employers, may increase job satisfaction among staff.

- Spending time during employee orientation discussing the impact of services provided to an individual with IDD. Employees are five times more likely to be engaged in their work if they understand whom their work benefits and why.
- Survey employees and provide opportunities for staff to collaborate with others and share their feedback with supervisors and management regarding improvements within day-to-day operations, agency policies, etc.
- Help employees see the deeper meaning in their day-to-day work and be able to recognize a job well done (8).

The Importance of DSPs in a Provider Agency

For the provider agency, the DSP is the foundation for the care they deliver to an individual with IDD. Quality DSPs are a huge asset to the provider and ultimately are instrumental in creating a professional reputation for an agency. The amount of complex decision-making and responsibility of job requirements depends on staff who, not only fill a job position, but have a heart for working with individuals with IDD and have the skills to assist in developing an inclusive life for those individuals. Providers can show their staff appreciation, develop loyalty, and increase staff retention by:

- Provide regular and frequent training opportunities training for DSPs (2) (7).
 - Consider on line web-based, or community-based training specifically geared toward the DD population.
 - Encourage DSP's to pursue certification.
 - Develop initiatives to recognize DSPs for professional achievement such as expanding competencies and obtaining certifications.
- Offer a mentoring program for DSPs (20).
 - Mentoring benefits staff by developing a bond with other experienced staff members.
 - Mentoring encourages new staff to feel part of a team, fosters feelings of inclusion, opens lines for communication, and develops a trusting relationship with employers.
 - Develop initiatives that recognize the extra effort of staff mentors for mentoring a new DSP.
- DSP's with scheduled supervision provides opportunity for job performance feedback and improvement (2) (7).

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- Good communication between staff and supervisors can help to reduce stress.
 - Planning regular team meeting as an avenue to open communication between supervisors and staff members.
 - Consider offering options such as self-schedule and or have a flexible work schedule (7).
 - Highlight staff’s natural talents such as ability to play an instrument, art, outdoor activities, gardening. Not only will the staff enjoy sharing their talents, but the individuals can benefit from engaging in the activities.
 - Ensure jobs expectations are well defined to reduce vagueness in role responsibilities (2) (7).
 - Low job satisfaction is directly associated with wages. Low job satisfaction is a high predictor of turnover (2) (7). Consider checking with other providers in your area or the Virginia Employment Commission to verify appropriate wage range.
 - Develop an exit interview or questionnaire.
 - Examine the information collected to identify the reasons staff might be leaving the agency. Develop a retention program to address reasons why past staff have resigned. (6).



DSP Awards for Exceptional Service

The American Network of Community Options and Resources (ANCOR), who are advocates for the critical role service providers play in enriching the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (DD).

ANCOR recognizes a national award recipient, and as many as 51 state-specific award recipients (for all 50 states and the District of Columbia), and a small handful of recipients receive special category awards.

The nomination process begins each year during DSP Recognition Week, which is September 11th-17th in 2022. You can nominate an outstanding DSP for an award [here](#).



Celebrate Your DSP's

Create an Appreciation Board

This can be a bulletin board or just a designated area of a wall where clients, support coordinators and managers can say thank you to DSP's using sticky notes. Put it in a heavily trafficked area, so everyone can see it and add their kind thoughts, praise and thank you.

Give Small Appreciation Gifts with a Handwritten Thank You Note

Designate a week to be DSP Appreciation Week and give away small gift awards, or a hand written thank you note for a job well done.

Host A Family Picnic or Fun Day

Many DSPs spend limited time with their families. Hold a picnic or just a fun day and let staff invite family members. Managers and supervisors should be encouraged to share their appreciation of each DSP's work and dedication with the DSP and with their family members, throughout this special day.

Give Small Awards to Staff Members

Designate a week to be DSP Appreciation Week and give small awards, such as "Most Cheerful" or "Most Creative Cook" or "Always on Time for PCP Appointments".



Resources

Supplemental Training & Competencies

Guidance Documents

- [DSP and DSP Supervisor DD Waiver Orientation and Competencies Protocol*](#)
- [DD Orientation and Competency Supervisor Assurance](#)
- [DD Orientation and Competency DSP Assurance](#)

DSP Supplemental Training

- [Choking Risk](#)
- [Changes in Mental Status](#)

Basic Competencies

- [DSP and Supervisors Competencies Checklist* \[Word Version\]](#)

Advanced Competencies for DBHDS-Licensed Agencies

- [DBHDS Health Competencies Checklist](#)
- [VA DD Autism Competencies](#)
- [VA DD Behavioral Competencies](#)
- [DD Advanced Competencies Training Topics](#)

Tests

- [DSP Orientation Test](#)

OIH-HSN Training Opportunities

DSP's who receive continuing education and training are better equipped at providing person-centered care, promoting inclusion and advocating for individuals with DD, as well as being an asset to their employers.

Online trainings and webinars have been shown to be convenient and flexible way for DSPs to increase their knowledge. The DBHDS Office of Integrated Health – Health Supports Network (OIH-HSN) posts a quarterly training schedule for live events.

You can sign up to receive regular notification of these training sessions via email, on the Provider Development Listserv at:

<https://lp.constantcontactpages.com/su/Z8Uy2i7/providernetwork>

OIH-HSN has also developed training sessions housed on the Commonwealth of Virginia Learning Center (COVLC) website, which can be accessed 24 hours a day, seven days

a week. To set up an account with the COVLC, please refer to the COVLC instructions listed below. The training sessions currently posted to the COVLC are:

- The Fatal Seven
- The Importance of Calling 9-1-1
- The My Care Passport & Advocacy Tip Sheets
- Falls.

Commonwealth of Virginia Learning Center access DBHDS-OIH Training by setting up an account at <https://covlc.virginia.gov/Default.aspx>

Mary Marshall Scholarship Program at VDH - <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/health-equity/forms-and-applications/>

Eunice Kennedy Shriver Center Education and Training - <https://shriver.umassmed.edu/education/>

Eunice Kennedy Shriver Center Aging with Developmental Disabilities Trainings - https://shriver.umassmed.edu/programs/cdder/aging_idd_education

My Life My Community - <https://www.mylifemycommunityvirginia.org/taxonomy/mlmc-menu-zone/general-information>

The Arc is a community-based organization providing resources and tools for individuals and families - <https://www.thearcofva.org/>

National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP) - <https://nadsp.org/>

Find a Mental Health First Aid Training - <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/about/>

California DDS DSP Training - <https://www.dsprtrain.org/>

Indeed - find jobs, company review, and salary information - <https://www.indeed.com/career/>

Research healthcare related programs at the Virginia Community College System - <https://courses.vccs.edu/programs>

G3 Tuition Assistance Virginia - <https://courses.vccs.edu/programs>

Search for jobs, information on the Virginia Workforce Connection - <https://www.vawc.virginia.gov/vosnet/Default.aspx?enc=vLa15KtdCzQQMP6jrcRdlQ>

Virginia Employment Commission Recruiting solutions for employers - <https://www.vec.virginia.gov/employers/recruiting-solutions-for-employers>

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