

West Virginia Direct Support Workforce Study



A Review of Direct Support for People with Developmental Disabilities in West Virginia

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Abstract

Introduction. Direct support workers provide primary supports to a large variety of individuals, including the elderly, individuals with developmental disabilities and returning veterans. Unfortunately, there is a well-documented staff shortage in this vital industry. Because West Virginia has the highest percentage of individuals with disabilities in the nation, the direct support staff shortage is of particular concern. The direct support industry in the state has at least three main shareholders: the employers, the workers and the individuals who receive supports. Hence, it is of vital importance to receive input from all stakeholders. To receive balanced input, the current project was guided by focus groups conducted with stakeholders. It gathered quantitative information from both direct support workers and the agencies that employ them through agency and worker surveys.

Methods. To assure that all stakeholders were involved in the development, methods, conduct and generation of recommendations from the study, focus groups were conducted prior to the administration of any surveys. Agency surveys (that gathered information on characteristics of the workforce, the population served, vacancies, worker compensation and training) were distributed by mail. Worker surveys (that gathered demographic information, asked about job related issues, job tasks and stress, paperwork and training received) were subsequently distributed through their employers but were completed and returned independently. Once all data were collected, two additional focus groups (one with consumers and one with agency heads) were held to review the study findings.

Findings. Agencies reported that 16% of their full-time positions were currently vacant with a mean length of vacancy of over five weeks. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of their workers had left in the last year, with 20% leaving in less than 6-months of their hire date. The mean starting wage was \$7.93 and the average wage was \$8.62 per hour. When comparing the results from the agency and worker surveys, both agencies and workers frequently reported paperwork to be a common job task; however, agencies more frequently reported providing benefits (i.e., Paid Holidays, Paid Time Off and Cost of Living (COL) raises) than did workers. Workers indicated that they stay in their jobs because of their relationship with the consumers and for the flexible hours. Overwhelmingly, workers reported that the low wages are a reason that they would leave their current jobs. Additionally, workers' relationships with their supervisors and opportunities for professional growth were related to workforce morale.

Recommendations. (1) Investigate ways to ensure that West Virginia's direct support workforce is compensated at a living wage standard. (2) Reimburse employers for competency-based training. (3) Offer support to providers for additional training of front line supervisors. (4) Further facilitate direct support workers' relationships with their consumers by developing training and supports that assist consumers/families in the self-direction of supports. (5) Pull together Vocational/Technical schools and two-year degree institutions to incorporate Direct Support Worker training in their programs that is based on well-constructed competency-based curriculum. (6) Modify the current billing and documentation system to lessen the burden of excessive paperwork.

The current study is a follow-up and expansion of a 2002 survey of direct support workers in West Virginia (WV.) Based upon needs identified by the WV Developmental Disabilities Council, this report describes the strengths and challenges of West Virginia's direct support workforce for individuals with developmental disabilities. It includes input of direct support workers, provider agencies and the individuals who receive these services. It makes recommendations based on the information generated and a review of these findings by recipients of direct support. Funded by the WV Developmental Disabilities Council, the study includes the survey responses of 15 agencies and 110 direct support workers as well as input from four focus groups, statewide.

Introduction

Direct support workers provide primary supports to a large variety of individuals, including individuals with developmental disabilities, the elderly and returning veterans. The services provided by these workers enhance the lives of their clients and aids in their successful living. Harmuth (2002) reported that there were 2.2 million direct support workers in the United States in the year 2000. Despite the large number of individuals working in this field, there is a well-documented staff shortage in the direct support industry (cf., ANCOR, 2008; American Health Care Association, 2003; Harmuth, 2002; Sullivan, 2007.) Difficulties associated with employing individuals in direct support fields include low pay, insufficient training, and the demanding nature of the job (cf. Harmuth,

2002; Health Care Association, 2003; Spillman & Long, 2007; Wright, 2005.) Combined, these factors result in a high turnover rate in direct support industries.

Because of the state's population characteristics, the direct support staff shortage is of particular concern to this region. West Virginia has the highest percentage of individuals with disabilities in the nation, with a disability rate of 24.4% of the population (Waldrop & Stern, 2001.) This rate is approximately 10% above the national average. In 2000, approximately 15.3% of West Virginia citizens were 65 years of age or older (Hetzl & Smith, 2001.) The U.S. Census Bureau (2005) estimated that by 2030 the traditional caregiving workforce (women between the ages of 25 – 44) will decrease by 28%. These statistics suggest that the demand for direct support workers will increase within West Virginia and will be important for the well-being of the state's most vulnerable populations.

Hence, direct support is a high-demand, high-growth industry in West Virginia. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 19,800 nursing assistants, home health aides, and personal care/home care aides worked in West Virginia in 2006. This number does not include self-employed direct support workers in the state. This results in a ratio of approximately one direct support service provider for each 21 persons with disabilities. Even with all of these individuals working in the field, ANCOR cites a 6.7% national vacancy rate compared to 16% in West Virginia. Thus, the number of direct support professionals in the state falls short of the demand.

To generate recommendations to improve the current situation, it is important to gather data to examine the current state of the direct support field, factors which may lead to unstable employment in this field

WEST VIRGINIA DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE STUDY

and areas in which improvements are necessary. With these data, informed recommendations can be generated to best meet the needs of the state.

The concerns related to the direct support industry in the state have at least three main shareholders: the employers, the workers and the individuals who receive supports. Hence, when gathering data, it is of vital importance to receive input from both the agencies that employ direct support workers and the workers themselves. With data from these two stakeholders, as well as from consumers of direct support services, a broad picture of the status of services in the state can be provided. Adhering to this multi-faceted approach leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the current difficulties faced by this field.

Specifically, data from the agencies that hire direct support workers provide information on the demand for these workers and the systemic supports in place to sustain them. For example, agencies that hire direct support workers can provide information related to the location of the individuals that are served by the agencies and demographic factors of the employees of the agencies. These agencies can also provide various information related to staff availability, training and retention.

Because job satisfaction is a factor that influences the likelihood of continuing in a direct support job (cf., O'Brien, 2004), direct assessment of job satisfaction of the direct support workers provides valuable data about the industry. The Research and Training Center on Community Living, based at the University of Minnesota, has developed a job satisfaction survey that is comprehensive in terms of job satisfaction issues.

The current project gathered quantitative information from both direct support workers and the agencies that employ them through agency and job

satisfaction surveys. Additionally, this project was guided by qualitative data from focus groups conducted with individuals who receive direct support services, direct service workers and executives at agencies that employ direct support workers. These focus groups dealt with important aspects of direct support services, including obtaining these services, financing services and retaining direct support staff.

Together, these two surveys and the four focus groups provided important information regarding the state of direct support services and staffing in West Virginia. This greater understanding of the direct support workforce and availability in the state is designed to help inform policy and practice in this increasingly important area.

Methods

The current study used Participatory Action Research methodology. Participatory Action Research (PAR) ensures that those likely to be affected by the research findings were involved in the development, methods, conduct and recommendations of the study. Wadsworth (1998) notes: "PAR is research which involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action which they experience as problematic in order to change and improve it...(it) is not just research which is hoped that will be followed by action. It is action which is researched, changed and (then) re-researched within the research process by participants...those to be helped determine the purposes and outcomes of their own inquiry."

The initial development of this study investigating the West Virginia direct support workforce was the result of discussions of the WV Developmental Disabilities Council (DDC), a 32-member group of agencies, organizations, advocacy

WEST VIRGINIA DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE STUDY

groups, individuals with developmental disabilities and/or their family members. The research design was presented to a group of DDC members for review.

Focus Groups

Focus groups with consumers and other community representatives, direct support workers and agency directors were conducted prior to the administration of any surveys. These focus groups were conducted in three different geographical locations, using methodologies specifically tailored to the population and setting in which they were administered. After conducting focus groups, the survey measures were modified accordingly to incorporate suggestions.

Focus Group 1: CED Consumer Advisory Committee

An initial focus group was conducted with the Consumer Advisory Committee (CAC) of the Center for Excellence in Disabilities (CED) at West Virginia University. The CAC members present during the focus group consisted of an individual with developmental disabilities with his support staff, an individual with a physical disability, a parent of a child with developmental disabilities, a disability rights advocate, a representative from the WV Developmental Disabilities Council (DDC) and a director of an agency that serves individuals with disabilities. The general format utilized for facilitating the focus group was based on the procedures described by McNamara (1997.)

The first author facilitated the meeting. The facilitator first summarized and explained the following open-ended questions: What do you see as the strengths of the direct support services you receive? What do you see as the weaknesses of the direct support services you receive? What

are the current gaps in direct support services? Each question was then asked individually. For each question, the group facilitator (a) read the question aloud, (b) gave the participants two minutes to think about and write down any ideas, and (c) provided each participant an opportunity to share his/her thoughts on the topic by asking each of the questions in a consistent, predetermined order. As participants shared their ideas, the main points from each were written on a large poster in view of participants by the co-facilitator. Each question was thoroughly discussed before moving on to the next question. Once all questions had been asked, the results of all questions were verbally summarized and further discussion and clarification was encouraged.

Focus Group 2: West Virginia Behavioral Healthcare Providers Association

The West Virginia Behavioral Healthcare Providers Association is a group of directors from various organizations that provide supports to individuals with developmental disabilities in the state of West Virginia. To receive feedback on the surveys to be administered as well as on the proposed methods of survey distribution, the first and third authors attended one of the Providers Association's meetings, presented the rationale for the surveys as well as a preliminary version of the surveys, and discussed any suggested modifications to the survey or methodology. After a brief presentation, this focus group consisted of a question and answer session as well as informal suggestions from the Providers Association regarding both survey content and strategy. One association member subsequently assisted the experimenters in revision of the survey.

WEST VIRGINIA DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE STUDY

Focus Group 3: Direct support workers

Informal interviews were conducted with a number of direct support workers at the main offices of Arc of Harrison County in Clarksburg, West Virginia. The first author and an additional co-facilitator conducted all interviews. The interviews were conducted in a conversational manner in a break area directly outside of the offices. Various direct support workers were present for varying durations. Additionally, the consumers that the direct support workers were serving were present, but did not participate in the conversation. For these interviews, no predetermined number of questions was used, and the topics varied in accordance with the workers' interests and experiences.

Follow-up Focus Groups

Two additional focus groups were held to review the study findings, help interpret these data and to offer further recommendations. First, the West Virginia Developmental Disabilities Council was presented with the study findings at a regularly scheduled Council meeting and asked to comment on issues related to wages, recruitment and retention, training, direct support worker tasks, supervision and job satisfaction. Council members raised several issues as the West Virginia data were compared to national data. Notes were taken by the first and second authors in order to capture the responses of the Council. Second, the same data were presented to two individuals from the West Virginia Behavioral Healthcare Providers Association, via conference call. Notes were taken by the first and second authors in order to accurately summarize the providers' recommendations.

Instruments

Feedback from Focus Group 2 altered the content (e.g., questions about union membership and paperwork), writing style (e.g., more conversational, formatting of document) and delivery of the surveys (i.e., administered to workers through employers.) Although the surveys were based on previous work conducted by the University of Minnesota, Research and Training Center on Community Living (2000), local concerns greatly shaped the instruments. A general description of the surveys administered to direct support workers and representatives of the agencies that employ them follows below.

Worker Survey

A nine-page survey, generated via the Survey Monkey web site, was presented on both sides of 8.5" X 11" sheets of paper. The worker survey consisted of 22 items presented in various formats (e.g., lists, Likert-type scales and multiple-choice questions) covering a wide range of topics. Specifically, some survey items asked basic demographic questions (i.e., gender, age and educational level.) Other items asked about job related issues such as: employment status and compensation (i.e., length of employment, wages, benefits, union status and full-time status); job tasks, including paperwork and stress; training received (e.g., preparation, learning style); job supports (e.g., supervision, possible advancement and compensation); and the workplace (e.g., employee input, encouragement.) Additional items asked about job satisfaction issues such as overall positives (i.e., things they like and why they stay) and negatives (i.e., things they do not like and why they would leave.)

WEST VIRGINIA DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE STUDY

Agency Survey

A four-page survey generated via the Survey Monkey web site was presented on both sides of 8.5" X 11" sheets of paper. The agency survey consisted of 33 items presented in various formats (e.g., lists, short answer and multiple-choice questions) covering a range of topics. Specifically, a number of questions asked about the characteristics of the agency's workforce (e.g., union membership, size, gender, tenure, tasks performed), the population served (e.g., number of consumers), and vacancies (e.g., number, length, turnover.) Other questions focused on compensation (e.g., benefits and wages) and training. Additional open-ended questions focused on common challenges and solutions.

Survey Administration

Agency surveys were distributed by mail to all agencies included on a list of licensed facilities publicly available from the West Virginia Office of Health Facility Licensure and Certification. Agency surveys included a cover letter that (a) briefly described the survey, (b) indicated that all responses would remain confidential, (c) asked the respondent to return the survey in the enclosed envelope and (d) asked the respondent to complete and return the enclosed postcard. The postcard, included in the mailing, asked for contact information for the agency and the number of employee surveys that they would be willing to distribute. Surveys were then mailed to nonresponding agencies a second time. The first mailing, consisting of 130 surveys was completed on October 7, 2008 with a due date for surveys to be returned on November 15, 2008. Follow up telephone calls were made to all recipients approximately one week after this mailing (i.e., October 14, 2008) to clarify the instructions included on

the cover letter. A second set of follow-up phone calls urging agencies to return the surveys even though the deadline had passed were made shortly after the initial deadline expired (i.e., November 18, 2008.) The second mailing of agency surveys was completed on December 2, 2008 with a submission deadline of January 15, 2009. This second mailing consisted of the same 130 agencies; however, more specific contact information obtained through the follow-up telephone calls was utilized to more explicitly target the appropriate respondents. Follow-up telephone calls for this survey were completed approximately two weeks after the deadline (i.e., February 5, 2009) urging the agencies to return the surveys, even though the deadline had expired.

Due to suggestions obtained during the focus group phase of this study, worker surveys were distributed through their employers but were completed and returned independently. This was done due to the lack of a centralized registry of direct support workers, and the unwillingness of all agencies queried to provide contact information for their employees. These worker surveys were distributed to the agencies immediately upon receipt of the postcards mentioned above and deadlines for the return of surveys were approximately one month from the date they were mailed. As with the agency surveys, the employee surveys contained a cover letter briefly explaining the survey and indicating that direct support worker participation would remain confidential.

Findings

Fifteen (15) agencies that employed Direct Support Workers (DSW) participated in the study. This sample is 11.5% of possible respondents and includes both small (i.e., employing as few as six DSWs)

WEST VIRGINIA DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE STUDY

and large agencies (i.e., employing over 1,400 DSWs.) On average, these agencies employed 194 employees, 72% of which were working full time. Data summarizing general workforce characteristics of the responding agencies are presented in Table 1, below.

Table 1: Agency Characteristics

	Mean	SD	Range
Number of Counties Served	7.53	12.33	1-40
Number of Consumers Served	108.57	181.87	3-700
Number of Staff	193.87	360	6-1,450
Percent Male	22.49	15.91	2-56
Percent Full-time	72.04	27.01	26-100
Full-time Hours	42.33	9.01	35-65
Percent Part-time	25.00	23.47	0-73
Part-time Hours	23.79	6.95	18-40
Length of Employment (years)	2.48	1.50	0.75-25
Maximum number of Workers*	66.0	38.82	18-unltd
Full-time Vacancies (%)	15.86	19.87	3-63
Workers hired in the past year (%)	43.33	25.68	13-99
Length of Vacancies (weeks)**	5.40	4.42	1-cont.
Workers that left in the past year (%)	27.49	19.22	4-79
Workers that left < 6 mo. from hire (%)	20.33	20.21	3-76
Starting Wage (hourly)	7.93	1.87	6.55-13
Maximum Wage (hourly)	10.84	3.71	7.75-18
Hours of Pre-service Training (mode)	28.60	17.81	8-80
	(32)		
Hours of On-the-job Training (mode)	26.80	13.81	10-50
	(40)		

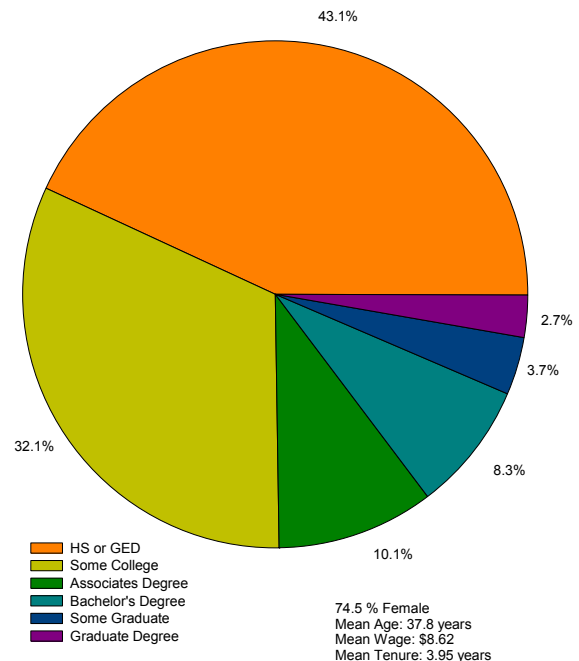
*Three responded "unlimited" **Two responded "continuous"

Agencies reported that, on average, 16% of their full-time positions were currently vacant with a mean length of vacancy of over five weeks. Agencies reported that twenty-seven percent (27%) of their workers had left in the last year, with 20% leaving within less than six months of their hire date. Starting wages ranged from \$6.55 to \$13.00 an hour with a mean starting wage of \$7.93 and a mean maximum wage of \$10.84. Workers received both pre-service (average of 29 hours) and on-the-job training (average of 27 hours.)

Worker Characteristics

One-hundred and ten (110) direct support staff completed the worker surveys. This sample included individuals of various ages (i.e., 19-73), educational backgrounds (see Figure 1), and with varying levels of experience (i.e., with current employer from one month to 25 years.) Over 70% of workers were female.

Figure 1: Education of Workers

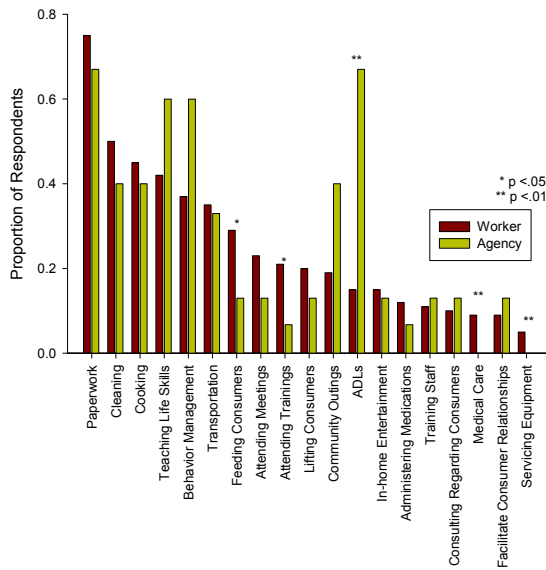


Common Tasks

Both the worker and the agency surveys asked respondents to report the five most common tasks that direct support workers do on their jobs. These parallel questions allow for a direct comparison of the tasks that both employers and workers perceive as being central to the role of a direct support worker. These data are depicted in Figure 2.

WEST VIRGINIA DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE STUDY

Figure 2: Common Tasks as Reported by Agencies and Workers by Proportion



Both the agencies and the workers frequently reported that paperwork is a common job task. However, agencies more frequently reported activities of daily living as a common job task; and, workers reported that feeding consumers, attending trainings, providing medical care and servicing consumer equipment were typical of job duties at a significantly higher proportion than did agencies. Aside from these notable exceptions, the ranking of common tasks was relatively consistent across groups.

Because the highest proportion of direct support workers reported paperwork as a common job task, we examined the relation between the number of hours spent doing paperwork, and workers' perceptions that this paperwork is convenient and/or necessary.

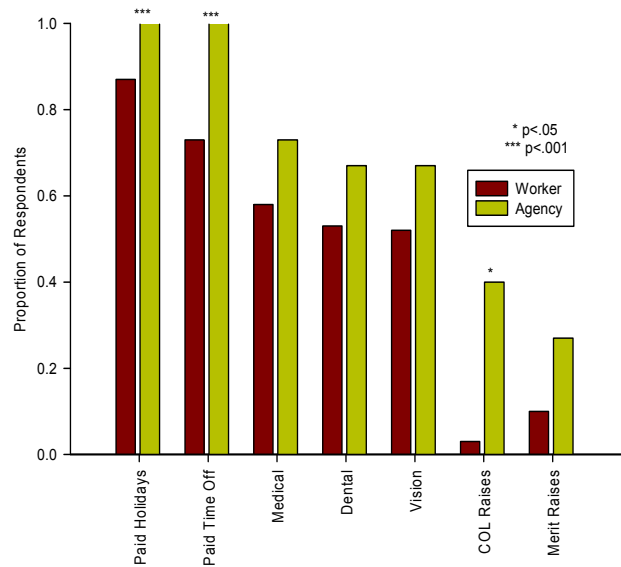
There was a negative correlation between the number of hours of paperwork that are required, and workers' perception that the paperwork is necessary and convenient. Furthermore, there was a strong positive correlation between the degree to which the workers found the paperwork to

be necessary and the degree to which they found it convenient.

Benefits and Compensation

A number of questions on both the worker and the agency surveys concerned benefits and compensation. Figure 3, below, provides a detailed depiction of the benefits that agencies report providing to direct support workers and the benefits that the workers report receiving.

Figure 3: Benefits as Reported by Workers and Agencies



Significant differences in reporting by employers and workers were observed in the compensation categories of Paid Time Off, Paid Holidays and Cost of Living (COL) raises, with agencies being more than twice as likely to report Cost of Living and Merit Raises than do workers. Additional questions concerning wages earned/provided were also asked and are summarized in Table 2.

WEST VIRGINIA DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE STUDY

Table 2: Wages Reported by Agencies and Workers

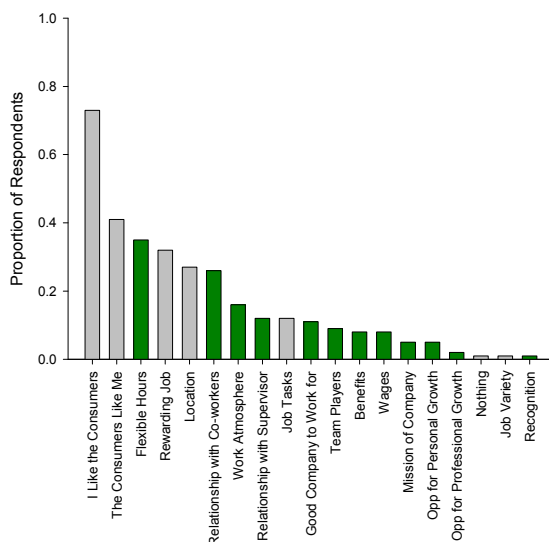
	Worker Mean (n=110)	Range	Agency Mean (n=15)	Range
Starting Wage	\$7.49	\$4.15-17	\$7.93	
Current Wage	\$8.62	\$6.50- 19.27	-----	-----
Years Employed	3.95	<1 – 25	-----	-----
Increase/Year	\$0.38	\$0.00-3	-----	-----
Maximum Wage	-----	-----	\$10.84	\$7.75-18

As can be seen in Table 2, similar wages were reported by both agencies and workers. Consistent with the notion of cost of living wage adjustments, modest yearly wage increases were observed. Furthermore, no significant differences in wages were found based upon union membership.

Why Workers Stay or Leave

The worker survey directly asked employees to report three reasons that they stay in their jobs. Data showing the reasons that they stay in their jobs are depicted in Figure 4. Because not all workforce issues are controlled by employers, the issues that employers have the most control over are shaded green.

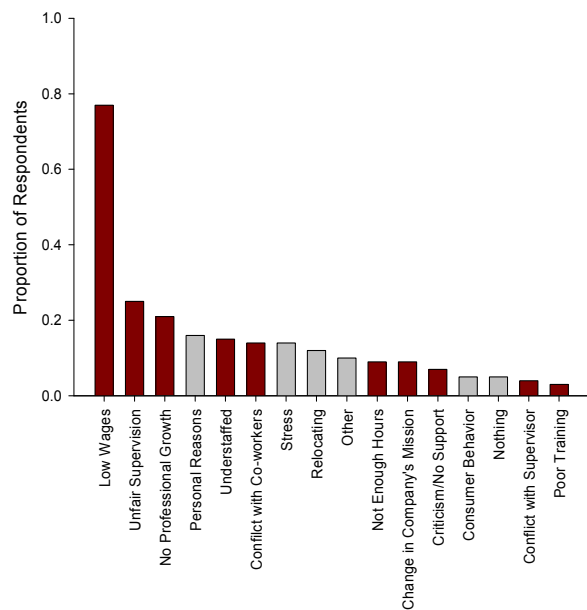
Figure 4: Why Workers Stay



Almost 80% of worker respondents said that they stay in their jobs because of their relationship with the consumers. Almost 40% of respondents noted that the agencies' flexible hours were a reason they continued on the job. Other reasons included location, relationship with co-workers, the work atmosphere and the fact that the job was rewarding.

The worker survey also directly asked employees to report three reasons that they would leave their jobs. Data from this question are summarized in Figure 5. As with reasons that employees stay in their jobs, not all factors that would cause employees to leave their jobs are under the control of their employers. To this end, the items which the employers have the most control over are highlighted in red. Whereas, it is primarily interpersonal issues (i.e., liking the consumers and their co-workers) which cause the employee to stay in their jobs, low wages are the primary reason that workers would leave their jobs.

Figure 5: Why Workers Would Leave



WEST VIRGINIA DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE STUDY

Almost 80% of workers reported that the low wages are a reason that they would leave their current jobs. Additionally, a smaller proportion of respondents (25%) indicated that they would leave their jobs due to supervision or lack of professional growth opportunities.

Worker Morale and Relationships with Their Supervisors

Because interpersonal relationships appear to have some influence on direct support workers' decisions to stay in or to leave their current jobs, and because the second most commonly reported reason that these workers would leave their jobs is unfair supervision, it is important to understand what practices contribute to workers' relationships with his or her supervisors. The worker survey asked a number of questions that involved job supervision. Specifically, it examined the degree to which workers' relationships with their supervisors are related to the degree to which one's supervisor encourages one's professional growth. To this end, the study examined the relation between one's relationship with their supervisor and (a) the degree to which they feel their opinions matter, (b) doing what they do best on the job, (c) their perception that their supervisor cares and (d) being encouraged by someone from the workplace. All of these variables significantly predicted one's relationship with one's supervisor ($F(1,104) = 14.85, p < 0.001$), both individually and as a whole. Analysis of these factors in terms of union membership revealed a significant relation between union membership and the extent that someone in the workforce encourages their professional growth ($F(1,98) = 8.82, p < .05$) but not for feeling that their opinions matter or perceiving that their supervisor cares.

Furthermore, each of these factors was significantly correlated with both one's relationship with their supervisor, as well as with co-workers. Additionally, a model examining the relation between staffs' relationship with their supervisors and (a) fair supervision, (b) the recognition they receive for their work, (c) communication regarding job expectations, (d) the feedback they receive regarding job performance and (e) the availability of their supervisors to answer their work related questions was evaluated. Results of this analysis were statistically significant ($F(1, 96) = 18.798, p < .001$.) No significant relation between these factors and union membership were observed. The degree to which these factors correlate with ones' relationship with their supervisor, as well as each other, was examined. As with the previous model, these Pearson's r correlations were large and significant, potentially outlining supervisory behaviors that may contribute to good relationships with one's employees. These correlations are important, because the study also found that workers' relationships with their supervisors are significantly related to workforce morale ($.57, F(1, 102) = 49.56, p < .001$.) In fact, the factors from the second of these two predictive models not only predicted one's relationship with their supervisor, but also workforce morale ($F(1, 95) = 20.29, p < .001$.) Moreover, as with the previous model, these factors were not only significantly correlated with workforce morale, but also with each other. In other words, higher worker morale was related to positive relationships with supervisors and recognition for their work.

A number of agency practices were also related to workforce morale. For example, factors related to professional growth seem to be related to workforce morale. Specifically a model consisting of (a) access to internal job postings; (b) opportunities to learn and grow; and (c)

WEST VIRGINIA DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE STUDY

support for professional development were significant predictors of workforce morale ($F(1, 95) = 24.75, p < .001$.) Furthermore, all of these factors were related to both workforce morale as well as each other.

Worker Training and Preparation

As shown in Table 1, employers provide an average of 28.6 hours of pre-service training and an average of 26.8 hours of on-the-job training. Workforce training efforts were so prominent, that 21% of direct support workers ranked attending trainings as one of their most common job tasks. To optimize this positive practice, a number of the questions on the worker survey examined employees' perception of their training. To this end, the study examined the degree to which aspects of the process as well as certain aspects of the perceived outcomes of training effect the degree to which employees believe their agency should keep their training program, and the degree to which they would recommend their training to others. Several aspects of the training examined (i.e., degree to which it was tailored to meet worker learning style, the degree to which it was interactive and the degree to which it was delivered at a comfortable pace) sufficiently predicted the belief that the agency should keep their current training program ($F(1,104) = 48.51, p < .001$), as well as whether workers report that they would recommend this training to others ($F(1,104) = 55.62, p < .001$.) The outcomes of the training provided (i.e., the degree to which it helped workers improve consumer quality of life, the degree to which it provided information needed to perform one's job, and the degree to which it prepared workers to complete their job responsibilities) also sufficiently predicted worker reports that their employer should keep their current training program ($F(1, 107) = 27.66, p < .001$) and their willingness

to recommend this training to others ($F(1, 107) = 51.76, p < .001$.) The degree to which these factors are individually correlated with reports that the agency should keep the current training program would recommend their training to others, as well as the degree that these factors correlated with employee's perceptions that the training prepared them to do their jobs were examined. All these factors showed strong positive correlations.

Summary and Conclusions

One way to address the issues raised in this study is to investigate how other states have met these similar challenges. As was indicated in the study findings, West Virginia, although behind a number of states, is similar to other underserved states in attempting to address Direct Support Worker issues.

Wages and Benefits

Findings from the current study suggest that West Virginia wages fall below the national mean for Direct Support Workers (DSW.) These data are consistent with a recent national study that found West Virginia DSWs to have lower average wages and to live further below the poverty line than workers in any other state (ANCOR, 2008.) Considering the fact that some workers maintained the higher salaries they received when they worked in state institutions, this mean may not reflect the true low wages received by direct support workers new to the field. In fact, the average starting wage for West Virginia DSWs working in non-institutional settings was the sixth lowest in the country. States with lower non-institutional wages generally are maintaining institutions, which significantly elevate the mean starting wages of the direct

WEST VIRGINIA DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE STUDY

service workforce (ANCOR, 2008.) Furthermore, the difficulties associated with low wages of West Virginia DSWs may be exacerbated because wages for direct support workers in West Virginia are the same across areas of differing costs of living. This may lead to excessively high turnover in areas in which West Virginia DSW wages fail to keep pace with the higher wages available in other professions or for working as a DSW in other nearby states. Regardless of locality, low wages remain the single most frequently reported reason that Direct Support Workers leave their jobs. Interventions used nationally to improve worker wages usually include a restructuring of either local, state or federal funding in order to provide agencies the supports they need to build in competitive wages or cost-of-living salary adjustments.

According to Larson and Hewitt (2005) several state legislatures have financed short-term or one-year cost-of-living adjustments for DSW in community residential settings. Another approach used by some states is to build in competency-based wage adjustments or incentives. As Direct Support Workers show competencies across a variety of categories including additional education, increased employer satisfaction, greater length of employment, additional skill areas and so on, they receive annual bonuses or alternative employment compensation and benefit packages. These may include tuition for school, tax credits, access to state health care plans, child care, discounts at local retailers, entrance fees at state parks and so on. If increases in agency reimbursements do occur, the percentage of that adjustment that goes to the workforce should be clearly designated to ensure that DSWs receive intended increases. Wages that are on scale with living wage standards would, thus, influence the rate of staff turnover and retention.

Staff Turnover and Retention

According to seven recent studies, vacancy rates for full time workers supporting individuals with intellectual disabilities range from 5% to 12% (Larson & Hewitt, 2005), nationally, whereas West Virginia has a 16% vacancy rate. With recent data showing that the 6.7% national vacancy rate for DSWs represents an annual turnover of 75% (ANCOR, 2008) the data regarding the percent of employees who left in the past year provided in Table 1 may have underestimated the impact of West Virginia's 16% vacancy rate. The workforce turnover rate is important because of costly results of turnover in terms of overtime paid to other employees for covering the time, advertising costs and training time and effort. The current study shows that other factors may influence retention as well.

Recognition and Promotion

Aside from employer feedback and in-agency recognition, there are few, if any, opportunities to be recognized in the role of Direct Support Worker. Some states such as Ohio, Tennessee, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Kansas, Michigan and others have formed coalitions that offer local chapters of the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP) which promotes credentialing, offers materials including training information and a newsletter. This encourages DSWs to think in terms of their role as part of a national network and a coalition that promotes such initiatives as the NADSP Code of Ethics and projects to expand consumer supports.

Although being able to move up in a particular organization has financial and professional growth opportunities, many direct support workers may find direct support more satisfying than management or supervisory positions (Larson & Hewitt,

WEST VIRGINIA DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE STUDY

2005.) It is certainly vital that highly motivated and skilled DSWs are available at every level of the organization. It has been shown that having positions requiring primarily direct support work, with some supervisory activity such as scheduling, peer mentoring, providing training in a specific skill area or developing agency-wide social events, may offer an expanded role without removing the DSW from his/her primary role. Having skilled direct support workers provide “mentoring” to new employees may offer recognition without excluding the worker from direct support activities. If this activity is designed to provide a slight wage compensation, mentoring workers might be “recognized” and “appreciated.”

Direct Support Worker Training

On the whole, respondents to the survey noted that much about training was worthwhile and well-received. This is certainly a positive step towards establishing a well-trained and competent workforce.

The amount and type of training, however, varied greatly among agencies. Training that addressed needed skills directly, in a well-paced fashion and with recognizing individual learning styles was the highest rated. In the last few years, several competency-based models for training direct support workers have been developed, nationally. Competency-based training means that: a) the curriculum works from an in-depth understanding of what is required to do the job, b) individuals who already have skills can “test out” of certain training, c) specific training is geared toward learning and practicing a specific job skill, and d) trainees are evaluated on whether or not they can actually carry-out a specific job activity at the end of training. Competency-based training eliminates irrelevant topics that are not needed in the job, can be presented without a great degree of pre-

training educational credentials and ensures that “completers” have skills that match what is required to do the job. One nationally recognized training program that works with states to match particular state needs with identified competency-based curriculum and offers training over the web is the College of Direct Support (College of Direct Support, 2008.) After completing this training, the DSW receives a certificate of completion listing competencies achieved. Other examples of exemplary training programs include the Community Supports for People with Disabilities program in Minnesota that provides a certificate or AAS degree and the Ohio PATHS Project that is a credentialing program offering several certificates.

Recruitment

The pool of potential recruits in West Virginia includes individuals with high school graduation or GED status. Many individuals in this study have some college and may be temporary workers waiting for other employment. New pools of workers could include recent high school graduates that have received Vocational/Technical training in their local communities. If this training is a recognized way to train, legitimize, and ensure competencies for paraprofessionals, the state may be able to pull from a pool of workers that are well on their way to becoming a well-trained and skilled workforce. This would require a commitment from state funders and state educators in supporting providers and their training protocols.

Creating a wider range of potential workers would necessitate moving to a competency-based recruitment and training system rather than one based purely on educational level. Thus, competency-based recruitment and training would open the DSW workforce to skilled individuals

WEST VIRGINIA DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE STUDY

without high school diplomas who could develop the job-related skills necessary to provide quality direct support.

Some states have found that recruitment has been supported by making connections with local workforce entities. In West Virginia, this would include Workforce West Virginia, West Virginia Works (TANF program) and the Disability Program Navigators at the Center for Excellence in Disabilities (CED.) These interactions could begin with describing the potential job market and ensuring that the direct support workforce is seen as both a valuable and potentially expansive market.

Ensuring that being a Direct Support Worker is a viable option for a particular job seeker is important to both recruitment and retention. The video *Direct Support: A Realistic Job Preview* by the Research and Training Center on Community Living (University of Minnesota) offers a pre-employment explanation of the job requirements and skills. It could be used in high schools, vocational/technical schools, in workforce agencies as well as in the media. Several West Virginia providers use this as a screening tool and feel that it assists them identify potential workers who will be a good “fit” for the occupation, thus reducing the high rate of turnover among those who are new to the field.

Supervision

Although most of the respondents in the current study had few problems with front line supervisors, some noted that they did not feel appreciated, challenged or recognized. Some indicated that their supervisor was not available as needed. The correlations between front line supervision and worker morale point out those supervisory skills that influence and motivate workers. By building on the successful supervision noted in the study,

West Virginia may find that offering systematic training for supervisors based on established competencies may strengthen this role. Developing a credential for this group might also be considered. Having supervisors become “mentors” as has been done in several states, ensures that some direct support work is being done as a model for new staff. Although the state has been involved in some national training for front-line supervision, no specific training for improving supervisory skills and techniques was presented. Since this study indicated that the role of front-line supervisors is vital to both job satisfaction and morale, as is seen nationally, specific training across agencies might have a large impact on services and agency efficiency.

Direct Support Worker Environment

In reviewing the role of Direct Support Workers, the current study found an alarming factor that may influence the effectiveness of direct support and agency services to individuals with developmental and other disabilities. Both workers and employers more frequently reported that completing paperwork was a common direct support worker activity compared with other job-related tasks. Providers point out that much of the paperwork is the result of the fee for service model adopted by West Virginia in 2004, in which workers must record, at 15 minute intervals, the tasks they are accomplishing.

Employers believe that workers most commonly provide activities of daily living including food preparation, self care, social interactions, etc. or spend time on outings with consumers. From the workers’ viewpoints, aside from paperwork, their most common tasks are cleaning and cooking. Only 40% listed training in life skills as a common activity while 60% of their employers thought this was a common

WEST VIRGINIA DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE STUDY

activity. It appears that the obligations of completing paperwork may lessen the time direct support staff can spend on meaningful activities that would improve the quality of life of consumers. A review of this process is needed.

Role of Consumers

The importance of the consumer in direct support workers' attitudes and commitment to their jobs was significant. Agencies, however, respond differently to the way DSWs and consumers of services interact. Aside from the regulations of specific licensing bureaus and the ethical directives of professions, much can be done to ensure positive feedback from consumers and DSWs alike. Perhaps a state-wide gathering to discuss the consumer-worker relationship and input from the recipients and their families would be beneficial to ensuring a professional, yet interpersonal interaction.

New federal and state options that put control for recruiting, hiring and retaining DSWs in the hands of consumers and their families certainly impacts the role of consumers. Support for individuals and families is needed to ensure that this control is effective, easy, economical and safe. As services become more consumer directed, the state is obligated to determine the best ways to support individuals and families in this new role.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are a compilation of data summaries, final focus groups, national comparisons and advocacy input. Efforts to incorporate these recommendations could best be initiated with the input of various stakeholders in a planning and implementation work group.

RECOMMENDATION: Investigate ways to support providers in setting up a wage and benefit program that will ensure that West Virginia's direct support workforce is compensated at a rate similar to other states with the same demographics and economic structure, considering local cost of living.

RECOMMENDATION: Reimburse DSW employers for providing training that ensures that direct support workers have the competencies that ensure a safe, consumer-directed and culturally sensitive service. Methods for doing this are given by the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals.

RECOMMENDATION: Offer support to providers that allows for training for front line supervisors and compensation for "mentoring" that makes state-of-the-art services available across agencies and organizations.

RECOMMENDATION: Build on the noted importance of the role of consumers by developing training and supports that assist consumers/families in the self-direction of supports.

RECOMMENDATION: Pull together both Vocational/Technical schools and two-year degree institutions to incorporate Direct Support Worker training in their programs based on a well-constructed competency-based curriculum. Investigate approaches of using "Apprenticeship" for Direct Support Workers.

RECOMMENDATION: Modify the current fee-for-service reimbursement system in order to ensure that direct support workers are providing the necessary and appropriate services to consumers rather than spending the majority of time on record-keeping activity.

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