

# POLICY RESEARCH BRIEF

## THE DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE AND COVID-19: WORK LIFE AND WAGE AUGMENTATION

INSTITUTE *on* COMMUNITY INTEGRATION | UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

### Research Issue

It is well known that there is a critical shortage of direct support professionals (DSPs) who support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to live in the community. While the work is high-skilled and varied in nature, wages remain low. COVID-19 had unprecedented adverse effects on DSPs, the people they support, organizations, and family systems. In most direct service industries, essential workers received wage augmentation due to pandemic related risks. While 97% of DSPs considered themselves essential, less than a third reported receiving any kind of salary augmentation. Our study showed worsening quality of DSPs' work life since the beginning of the pandemic; providing a wage augmentation (increasing pay) for them during this period slightly improved their self-reported quality of work life.

### Key Findings

#### Work life status since pandemic



#### Work life status and wage increase



“They have increased our wages and I hope we continue to receive raises because we all deserve it.”

#### Most important thing employer did for support



“We did receive two bonus checks of \$500 each during this pandemic, but with added expenses of providing our own masks and other supplies, increased gas for more shifts needing covered, and having no employee support system for therapy, the money did not go nearly as far as we needed it to.”

## 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) 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](https://z.umn.edu/dsp-covid19).

A 12-month follow-up survey was fielded in June-July 2021 and focused on vaccinations, return to work, and social inclusion. Results from the 12-month follow-up will be available in early fall of 2021.

### Policy Forum

Join us **August 17, 2021 from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. CDT on Zoom** for the Policy Forum on this issue of *Policy Research Brief*. Register here: [z.umn.edu/policyforumsignup](https://z.umn.edu/policyforumsignup)

The Policy Forum is a monthly web-based presentation and facilitated discussion exploring research published in the most recent *Policy Research Brief*. Please visit the website, [z.umn.edu/icipolicyforum](https://z.umn.edu/icipolicyforum), for details and to view previous forums.

Published July, 2021

Editor: Quinn Oteman, Graphic design: Connie Burkhart

Research cited: Hewitt, A., Pettingell, S., Kramme, J., Smith, J., Dean, K., Kleist, B., Sanders, M., & Bershadsky, 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/rtcprb](https://z.umn.edu/rtcprb)

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## Policy Recommendations

This data underscores the importance of providing financial compensation for DSPs during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Although more than half of DSPs reported their work life worsened during the pandemic, having a pay increase did make a difference. Our policy recommendations include —

- Design policies to permanently increase DSP wages to reflect the indispensable services they provide. Wage increases will improve quality of DSPs' work life and could help retain this diminishing workforce by communicating that DSPs are essential members of the team.
- Officially recognize the DSP workforce as essential workers. Grant them access to childcare and financial benefits that other frontline workers receive.
- Professionalize the DSP workforce with advanced education and training to maintain and enhance their skills, without them having to take unpaid time off work. DSPs should be equitably compensated after completion of advanced education and training.
- Establish a DSP Standard Occupational Classification. Direct support professionals are inaccurately classified in labor reports under other positions, which do not adequately represent the complex and diverse skill requirements of their work. This classification would create a concrete understanding of both the contributions and struggles of the workforce that could in turn inform policy-making and rate-setting decisions.

The University of Minnesota stands on Miní Sóta Makhóche, the rightful homelands of the Dakhóta Oyáte. We recognize the U.S. did not uphold its end of these land treaties. It is the current and continued displacement of the Dakhóta Oyáte that allows the University to remain today.

Ongoing oppression and discrimination in the United States has led to significant trauma for many people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities and other oppressed persons. At ICI, we affirm our commitment to address systemic racism, ableism and all other inequalities and forms of oppression to ensure inclusive communities.