



NEW YORK
**ALLIANCE FOR
INCLUSION & INNOVATION**



**Office for People With
Developmental Disabilities**



McSILVER INSTITUTE
FOR POVERTY POLICY AND RESEARCH
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Workforce Recruitment and Retention Project

Lessons Learned Report

Developed by:
NYU McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research

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Table of Contents: Lessons Learned Report

Table of Contents: Lessons Learned Report.....	2
Project Background.....	3
Recruiting and Onboarding.....	6
Initial Support to New Hires.....	7
Staff Recognition.....	8
Conclusion.....	12

Project Background

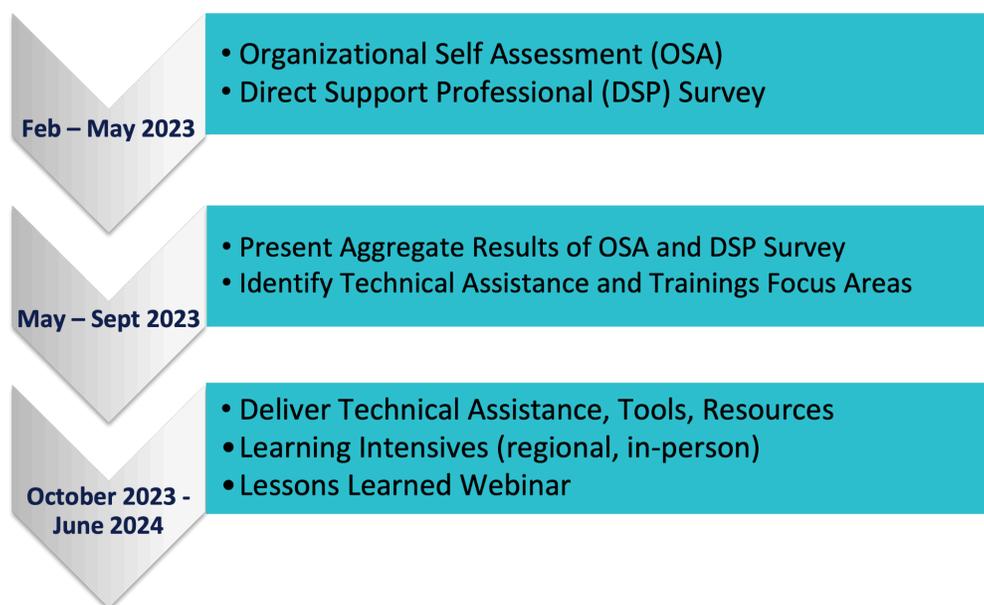
The New York State Office for People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD), and the New York Alliance for Inclusion & Innovation (New York Alliance), in partnership with the McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research at New York University worked on the [Workforce Recruitment and Retention Technical Assistance](#) project in collaboration with New York State providers to identify, share, and create resources and tools that can be used in recruitment and retention efforts.

The first step in providing Technical Assistance to providers was to understand where they are currently regarding recruitment and retention efforts. To do so, data were collected in two ways:

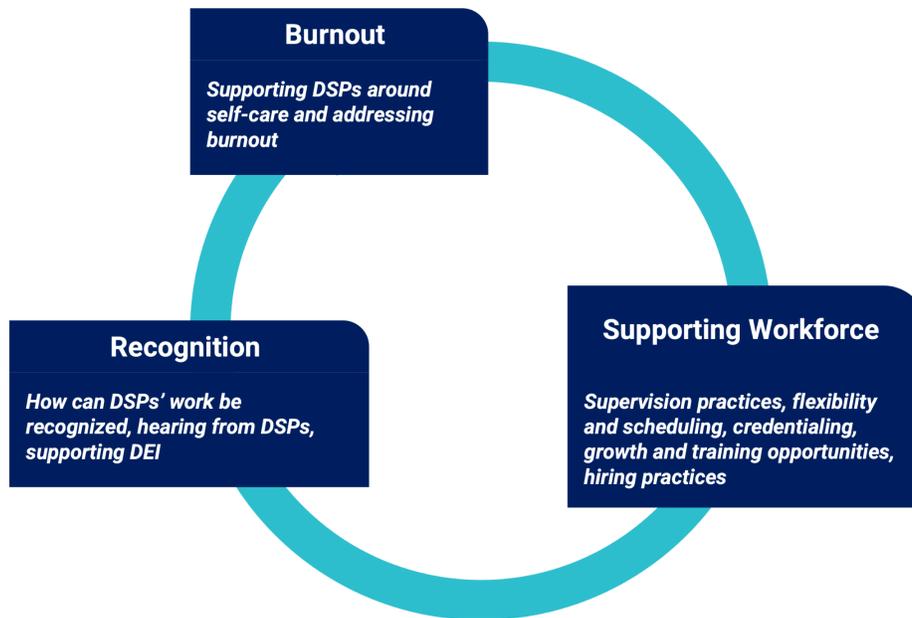
- 1) **An Organizational Self-Assessment (OSA)** completed by provider organizations.
- 2) **A Direct Support Professional (DSP) Questionnaire** completed by DSPs employed with providers across New York State.

The McSilver Institute analyzed data from 130 Organizational Self-Assessment (OSAs) and over 4000 DSP Questionnaires, then developed an [aggregate report](#) that was shared with providers. In the aggregate report, voluntary provider and State Operated information was compiled separately in recognition of the operational differences.

Furthermore, organization-specific reports were also provided to organizations who submitted an OSA and/or whose DSPs participated in the DSP Questionnaire. These individual reports scored and benchmarked the individual organization in comparison to statewide scores.



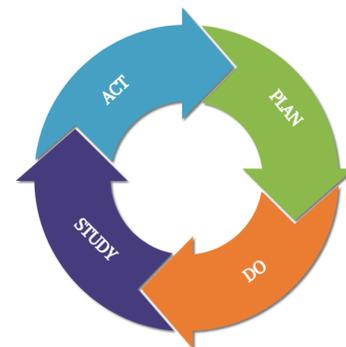
Based on the OSA and DSP Questionnaire results, areas for technical assistance were identified and resources were developed to address these areas of focus.



The McSilver Institute, in partnership with the New York Alliance for Inclusion & Innovation, developed a series of **technical assistance webinars** focused on supervision practices, preventing burnout, and enhancing well-being at work.

To encourage agencies to think about and implement organizational-level change, **five (5) regional in-person Learning Intensives** were also hosted in Buffalo, Syracuse, Albany, New York City, and Long Island.

- DSPs, supervisors, and management teams were encouraged to attend the Learning Intensives together to share perspectives and ideas.
- Teams created action plans for their own organizations using a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) framework and [template](#) as a guide to thinking about supporting the DSP workforce.
- Attendees were also able to connect with each other and opt to join a Community Contact List to further discuss and exchange strategies.



This Lessons Learned Report is a summary of the strategies and insights shared by teams during the five in-person regional Learning Intensives.

Practices identified by agencies to attract, engage, and retain a strong DSP workforce are organized into five themes in this report.

- Recruiting and Onboarding
- Initial Support for New Hires
- Staff Recognition
- Supervision
- Ongoing Support



Within each section of this report, strategies and examples of each corresponding theme are described in depth.

The McSilver Institute also hosted a **Lessons Learned webinar** that complements this report. The webinar recording and powerpoint slides are [available here](#).

Additional initiatives by the New York Alliance for Inclusion & Innovation (New York Alliance) and the New York State Office for People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) as part of this project are [available here](#).

Recruiting and Onboarding

Many DSPs reported that the job and role they have is different from their initial understanding of the job during the application and hiring process. Onboarding and recruiting processes can be redesigned to ensure that individuals are matched to their roles.

Strategies:

- Re-write job descriptions
- Create or use Realistic Job Previews (RJPs)
- Establish partnerships and pipelines; targeted recruitment
- Revise application, interviewing, and onboarding processes
- Measure impact of changes

Agencies shared that to address this issue, they have **revised job descriptions** to more accurately match daily responsibilities and skills needed for the role. Organizations also created site-specific job descriptions, listing out the specific skills needed at a particular location (e.g., complex medical or behavioral health needs), and also ask currently-employed DSPs to edit and provide feedback on new job descriptions.

Creating **Realistic Job Preview** (RJP) videos can be another strategy to help give applicants a sense of the daily work of DSPs. In addition to using new RJP videos filmed by the New York Alliance, agencies and/or sites can consider filming their own RJPs to capture the unique skill sets and needs of each job site.

To strengthen recruitment, organizations have found that establishing **partnerships with schools, doing ongoing outreach at community fairs, and partnering with workforce training/development organizations** have been helpful. These ongoing efforts can help people better understand the job opportunities available, including DSP roles and other staff and program roles within organizations. **Targeted recruitment** for specific positions and specific sites was another strategy that agencies found useful.

During the **application process**, agencies shared that they have found revising their applications has been helpful, such as listing out important qualifications, asking key questions such as “Are you able to work evening or weekend hours? What drew you to this DSP position?” and eliminating unnecessary elements of the application (e.g., certain education and degree qualifications are not required). These strategies can broaden the applicant pool and reduce barriers for some applicants and candidates.

When DSPs are **interviewing and onboarding**, some agencies switched to interviewing applicants at the specific work location/site, rather than at a central office of the agency, to help applicants better understand their roles. Agencies reported that they have also redesigned orientation to provide more site-specific information to new employees.

To **measure the impact** of these changes, agencies can use their data systems to compare the retention and turnover rates of DSPs who were hired before and after recruitment and onboarding changes. Taking an iterative, continuous approach to making adjustments to recruitment and hiring practices may also be helpful.

Initial Support to New Hires

Agencies identified that the initial 3-12 month time frame is when many newly hired DSPs may leave their roles. Thus, strengthening support for DSPs and helping them adjust to their roles during this initial time frame is critical for retaining DSPs in the long term.

Strategies:

- Dedicated Human Resource (HR) staff
- Determine fit of DSP with role(s)
- Mentor, coach, and/or buddy system
 - Financial incentives

Agencies shared various strategies they have begun to use to strengthen support for DSPs, such as designating a **Human Resource staff member who specializes** in supporting DSPs in their first 60 days of employment. Furthermore, a creative title change from “administrative/HR staff” to “Staff Concierge” was another idea that agencies thought was effective in encouraging DSPs to reach out to share concerns, questions, or feedback. HR staff also have check-ins with DSPs during the first 15, 30, 60, and 90 days to help employees feel more comfortable.

Additionally, managers and supervisors described their focus on **supporting and observing the skills** that newly hired DSPs brought to the team, to determine their fit with the role.

Supervisor and managers can then consider if the location, site, or nature of the role is suitable for the DSP and whether the DSP could benefit from a change in site or roles (e.g., direct support role, or administrative roles within agency). Supervisors and managers reported that individualized relationships and transparent conversations with DSPs were important in engaging and retaining new staff.

Many agencies shared they developed a **mentorship, coaching, or buddy program** for DSPs during their first 60-90 days. The relationship between mentors and DSPs can be useful for

DSPs to learn practical strategies and tips for working at their site or location. It is also important for DSPs to have choice in choosing the mentor(s) they are most comfortable working with.

In some agencies, mentors work with DSPs for at least 3 shifts in the beginning, and/or 40 hours of shadowing during the training phase, and then have check-in conversations in the first 30, 60, and 90 days. Some agencies also established **financial incentives** for mentors and buddies, so if DSPs stay at the agency past the first 6 or 12 months, the mentors and buddies receive a bonus for their contributions to the agency. As a future project, some agencies expressed interest in having more formal and specific training during which mentors can receive support and guidance.

Staff Recognition

DSPs continue to report that recognition is important to them, and DSPs who feel seen and heard are more likely to stay in their role. Recognition can be provided in a variety of ways and is something that all staff can contribute to and benefit from.

Strategies:

- Feeling known, seen, and heard; foster connections
- Recognition programs and events
 - Technology platforms
- Involve DSPs in planning initiatives
- Culture building initiatives
- Promote autonomy when scheduling

Strategies to help DSPs **feel known, seen, and heard** could include knowing their names, their hobbies/interests, their experiences if they feel comfortable sharing, or even the names of their pets and family members. Recognition can also mean validating that DSPs have very challenging roles, and that their dedication and passion is not unnoticed. To do this, some agencies' CEOs take time to hand write personalized letters as a token of their appreciation to DSPs. Furthermore, **fostering connections** among teams and within the organization is also helpful; some agencies have started programs for DSPs to "teach" and share with each other their talents and interests either virtually or in-person, such as painting, knitting, or music jam sessions.

Some agencies said they have monthly **recognition programs**, where anyone can submit messages or "Kudos" notes to recognize DSPs for their work, and there is a monthly drawing of gift cards for those who were nominated and recognized. Some agencies also have bulletin



boards, or email “spotlights” where DSPs are given awards for their work. When agencies hosted appreciation events, they also made sure to send other alternative gifts or meals to DSPs who are working their shift and unable to participate in the appreciation event. Intentionally inviting **DSPs to be part of planning committees** is also critical, as their feedback can identify the initiatives that are most meaningful to them, in turn making programs more successful.

Having a budget for staff recognition initiatives is important, but if agencies have a limited budget, an innovative way to obtain small gifts or awards for these recognition programs is to **partner with local businesses**. Local businesses may be able to give charitable donations, gift baskets, car washes, etc., and agencies shared that businesses such as banks have been able to offer a number of free financial consultations for DSPs.

There are various **technology platforms**** available to facilitate and normalize recognition across teams as well. For agencies that use Microsoft Office 365, Viva Insights is an app that allows staff to “send praises” to colleagues individually or in group chats. Agencies also shared they used Achievers, Snappy, TerryBerry 360 as platforms for all staff to send and receive recognition, which then translates into a point system for virtual or physical gifts. Supervisors also receive data on team members who are or aren’t receiving recognition, as well as alerts for milestones that may be helpful in fostering meaningful relationships with DSPs.

Organization-wide culture and promoting autonomy for DSPs were also identified as being important to organizations and DSPs. To build a more positive work culture, agencies also mentioned using Orange Frog as another platform to help “brand” their culture of the organization, helping leadership learn strategies based in positive psychology and implement initiatives that were cohesive within the organization. To promote autonomy, organizations found prioritizing autonomy in scheduling helped reduce their no-show or call-out rates for shifts. For example, by allowing DSPs in “floater” positions to choose their own shifts through the When I Work app, DSPs could select shifts at the sites that fit best with their schedules. As a result of choice being embedded into the scheduling process, DSPs were more likely to commit to those shifts and help fulfill agency staffing needs.

**Disclaimer: The McSilver Institute, NYAIL, and OPWDD are not endorsing the technology platforms and companies mentioned above, but providing them as examples raised by organizations throughout in-person Learning Intensives and webinars.

Supervision

Relationships with supervisors and managers is one of the top reasons that DSPs leave their roles. Many agencies shared that they would like to increase training and support for supervisors, so that the supervisors are better equipped to support DSPs.

Strategies:

- Mentorship and group support for supervisors
- Evaluate supervisors' skills and competencies
- Additional training for supervisors
- Power-sharing and strengths-based approach to supervision

Agencies identified strategies such as **mentorship programs for supervisors** so that supervisors can support each other and learn from each other. **Developing groups** for supervisors to meet and discuss agency culture was also identified as a strategy, particularly when there may be different cultures at different sites and locations within the same agency.

Many agencies shared that they would like to implement additional **evaluations for supervisors** to explore supervisors' skill sets, such as interpersonal skills, as well as conduct "360 evaluations" during which DSPs and supervisees can evaluate supervisors' competencies. Furthermore, agencies expressed interest in a potential **training curriculum** for supervisors, including additional training on diversity, equity, and inclusion and Mental Health First Aid.

Specific **supervisory skills and strategies** shared by agencies include: taking a strengths-based approach to recognize the skills of DSPs, power sharing during decision-making, giving DSPs the opportunity to set the agenda for supervision or send topics in advance of meetings, asking DSPs to define and clarify "What does support mean to you? What does supervision mean and how can supervision be helpful to you?" Most importantly, because supervisors are also growing and evolving in their roles, having **ongoing structures and avenues** to support supervisors can be very beneficial.

Ongoing Support

Ongoing support to all DSPs is critical to retaining a strong workforce. There are some strategies that are applicable for all organizations, while there are other strategies that organizations may choose to tailor and implement differently based on location, site, department, or team.

Strategies:

- Ensure DSPs feedback and perspectives
- Multi-departmental team approach
- Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) model
- Career growth and professional development and opportunities
- Support for personal experiences and urgent needs

As a foundation, initiatives to support DSPs should be **informed by DSP feedback and perspectives**. Agencies shared that surveys receive a higher response rate when the survey is distributed in accessible ways (e.g., link via chat, QR code, emails) and when DSPs have been given dedicated time to complete the survey during their shifts. The [DSP Questionnaire](#) (in multiple languages) developed as part of this project is available for agencies to reference and utilize, but agencies also have developed their own agency specific surveys and strategies for collecting feedback from DSPs.

When implementing any new initiative, having a **multi-departmental team** approach is important to supporting DSPs appropriately. Agencies shared that they established regular, frequent meetings across departments so that managers and teams could get to know each other and build working relationships. These strong connections were especially helpful in implementing strategies that require coordination and collaboration among multiple departments. Additionally, agencies reported that they have found it helpful to ensure DSPs are part of these teams, so that decisions regarding new strategies have DSP input and feedback.

Using a **Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) model** can also be helpful in thinking about initiatives to support DSPs at any stage of their work at the organization. The CQI framework emphasizes that change is iterative and continuous, so there is a constant cycle of planning, doing, studying, and acting upon the outcomes. A CQI template developed for this project and used by agencies during the Learning Intensives is available [here](#). Action plans should be specific, measurable, and feasible. Having a CQI team and establishing expectations for accountability is also a crucial part of the CQI model.



To provide ongoing support for DSPs, agencies also reported using specific strategies for certain sites or teams within their organization. For example, some agencies have created “specialty” DSP positions to recognize DSPs who have expertise in a specific skill set as part of their work at a specific site (e.g., “DSP II” position - medically complex support). Positions like these can be part of **DSPs’ career growth and professional development** as they become more experienced, and tying promotions and salary increases to reflect years of experience is also another strategy to retain the DSP workforce. For other agencies, when creating new job titles or roles is not feasible due to various constraints, connecting DSPs to various credentialing and education/tuition assistance benefits can be another way to support DSPs’ professional development (e.g., funding that is part of OPWDD’s strategic plan).

Beyond formal offerings from benefits packages or professional development opportunities, agencies also have developed a range of innovative strategies to **support DSPs on a more personal level**. For example, a few agencies noted developing grief support groups (e.g. their own versions of Team Lavender) for their employees to support each other, and these groups organically grew into a larger social support network for staff. These channels for psychological support, although informal, made DSPs feel valued at the workplace.

Some agencies also have an in-house resource navigator who connects DSPs with local or governmental resources around housing, food, legal support, etc. Organizations also shared they purchase a set of services from “Employee Resource Network,” which can provide services such as legal advice to DSPs. Other examples of individual level support include having an “emergency financial assistance fund” where staff receive funds for car repairs, rent, medical expenses that do not need to be paid back to the agency. These funds can stabilize DSPs’ health and safety outside of work, and in turn enable DSPs to continue working at their organizations.

Conclusion

Recruiting, engaging, and retaining a strong DSP workforce is an ongoing process. Organizational leadership have the opportunity to work closely with DSPs to think through strategies that are suitable for their specific organization, site, and team. Having the expertise of DSPs for any and all new initiatives implemented by organizations is a core theme across the five strategy areas discussed above. Additionally, a commitment to an ongoing, iterative cycle of planning, doing, and reflecting is also critical to the process of supporting and strengthening the DSP workforce.