2026 Invisible No More:

Advancing California's Direct Support Professional Workforce Summit

World Café Summary and Findings



The inaugural 2026 Direct Support Professional Workforce Summit was co-hosted by four statewide organizations: the Association of Regional Center Agencies (ARCA), California Community Living Network (CCLN), California Disability Services Association (CDSA), and California Policy Center for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (CPCIDD). The purpose of the Summit was to bring together Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), service providers, and stakeholders to identify and share strategies to advance and strengthen the DSP workforce in California. With approximately 250 attendees, including 175 Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), the Summit provided a collaborative forum to examine the opportunities and challenges facing the direct support profession, elevate recognition of DSP as a profession, and identify actionable strategies to strengthen the workforce.

Day one of the Summit was structured using the World Café model, providing DSPs with an interactive forum to share their experiences, perspectives, and insights about the direct support profession. The World Café model is a structured, participatory approach to facilitating large-group discussions that encourages participants to exchange ideas, identify common themes, build upon one another's perspectives, and generate collective insights around complex issues and questions. The prompt questions were designed to elicit conversations about purpose, motivation, quality, and career development.

PURPOSE AND MOTIVATION

Understanding the purpose and motivation that DSPs bring to their work is essential to developing effective workforce recruitment, retention, and professional development strategies. The purpose and motivation questions were intentionally designed to explore the intrinsic and practical factors that not only draw individuals to the profession but also what motivates them to continue working as a DSP despite challenges related to compensation, burnout, limited career pathways, and insufficient professional recognition. The following questions were asked about purpose and motivation:

- What originally attracted you to this position and why?
- Does society understand what DSPs do?
- Supplemental questions used to further the discussion included:
    - Do you feel there is a deeper purpose for the job of DSP beyond supporting the individual?
    - Have you ever had a moment when an individual had a breakthrough of personal power, making a choice that was based on input but totally independent?
    - How do you keep yourself from getting "burn-out" or "compassion fatigue"

DSPs reported a strong sense of purpose as one of the primary reasons they were drawn to and remain in the profession. Common motivations included a dedication to serving others, helping people achieve their goals and dreams, promoting inclusion, supporting individuals to remain in their homes and communities, teaching new skills, solving problems, advocating for people who may not always be heard, and helping individuals live life to the fullest.

Many of the DSPs also talked about the work itself being very emotionally rewarding as they spoke about feelings of fulfillment, joy, pride, connection, and the satisfaction of seeing progress in the people they support over time. For some, the profession provided a deeper purpose and positively changed how they viewed their own lives. For example, one of the DSPs referred to their job as their "calling", another DSP said the job "feeds their soul", and several other DSPs said they found a personal sense of purpose and meaning in the job. The desire to give people options, empower individuals to advocate for themselves, break down barriers, change public perceptions, and support people to become more independent was also acknowledged as reasons why DSPs feel passionate about their job.

Relationships and strong interpersonal connections were also noted as central sources of motivation for many DSPs. They shared the importance of the bonds they develop with both coworkers and the individuals they support, with several noting that personal or family

connections to people with disabilities initially influenced their decision to enter the profession. Across the discussions, DSPs consistently highlighted the value of relationship-building and the sense of connection and acceptance they experience in their work. Many described the individuals they support as genuine and welcoming and identified these meaningful relationships as a major reason they remain committed to the profession.

At the same time, DSPs acknowledged the practical factors that motivate them to work and influence their ability to remain in the profession, including wages, health benefits, flexibility, job stability, career advancement, and the need to support themselves and their families. It was a common theme amongst the DSPs that the intrinsic value and personal fulfillment they get from their work should not be viewed as a substitute for financial sustainability. DSPs shared that they deeply value and love the work they do but also need adequate compensation, comprehensive benefits, meaningful opportunities for advancement, and long-term economic security to remain in the profession.

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QUALITY SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

Questions about quality services and supports are especially important in the context of the DSP workforce because it connects conditions and expectations of the workforce to outcomes and real life experiences of the people who receive the services and supports. The questions related to quality were designed to better understand, from the DSP perspective, the traits, characteristics, skills, and practices they believe are most important to providing high-quality services and supports. The following questions are the table prompts that were used to facilitate the discussion related to quality:

- What are the most important skills essential for DSPs to provide quality services?
- What are the most important traits/characteristics and why?
- Supplemental questions used to further the discussion included:
    - Have you ever met a new DSP and thought and thought to yourself that they were not going to stay long? Were you right?
    - What are the signs of a DSP that's not going to make it? Are there things that could have been done to change that?
    - How do you know you are up to your high-quality standards of quality service?
    - What impact does a great supervisor have on providing quality direct services?

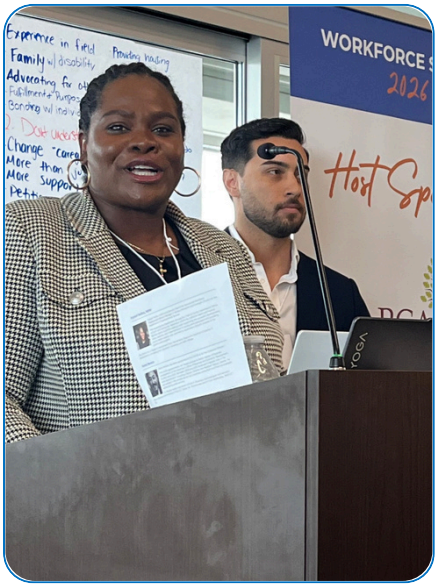
ESSENTIAL SKILLS, TRAITS, AND CHARACTERISTICS

The discussion related to the skills required to provide high-quality services resulted in DSPs identifying an extensive range of skills, traits, and characteristics necessary for effective direct support. Strong communication skills – verbal, written, active listening, non-verbal communication, tone and body language - were cited as the most critical skill for supporting people with IDD.

Other frequently identified skills included patience, adaptability, flexibility, critical thinking, problem-solving, time management, de-escalation, emotional regulation, situational awareness, professional boundary setting, advocacy, teamwork, organization, creativity, initiative, follow-through, and the ability to manage multiple expectations.

The importance of understanding person-centered practice was also reported as essential to providing high-quality services. Several of the DSPs said that it is critical to be able to meet individuals where they are, understand personal preferences and communication styles, support choice and autonomy, recognize individual strengths, and avoid imposing their own expectations on the individuals they support.

During table discussions and report outs, DSPs consistently challenged the notion that direct support is low-skilled work given all the skills that are required to properly support individuals with IDD. Specifically, they noted that the role requires a sophisticated combination of interpersonal, technical, observational, ethical, emotional, and problem-solving skills in order to be competent as a DSP. They stressed that their work extends far beyond traditional notions of caregiving and described themselves as advocates, teachers, mentors, problem-solvers, relationship builders, community connectors, and partners in helping people achieve greater independence, autonomy, and quality of life.



In addition to identifying essential skills, DSPs discussed the personal traits and characteristics they believe are critical to success in the profession. The most common traits and characteristics identified included compassion, empathy, patience, integrity, honesty, flexibility, open-mindedness, humility, dependability, creativity, resilience, and a sense of humor. They also highlighted the importance of maturity, self-awareness, emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, curiosity, authenticity, and a willingness to

learn and grow. Collectively, these traits reflect the interpersonal and personal qualities DSPs believe are necessary to build trust, navigate complex situations, develop meaningful relationships, and provide responsive, person-centered support.

Several DSPs said it is very important to distinguish between skills that can be taught and personal qualities that may be more difficult to develop through training alone. They referred to having "heart," genuine empathy, honesty, and respect for the individual as foundational characteristics. The ability to maintain one's own emotional regulation and not take challenging behaviors or interactions personally was also identified as a critical trait are often in circumstances that require rational detachment, resilience, self-discipline, and the ability to remain calm and supportive during challenging situations.

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FRONTLINE SUPERVISORS AND LEADERS

The importance of strong frontline supervisors and managers was consistently identified as critical to retention, job satisfaction, and service quality. Effective leaders were described as supportive, accessible, transparent, accountable, consistent, emotionally intelligent, and willing to listen. They valued supervisors who establish clear and realistic expectations, maintain an open-door policy, follow through on commitments, provide positive feedback, encourage work-life balance, support professional growth, and create a sense of belonging.

Several DSPs shared their belief that frontline supervisors can make or break the success of newer DSPs because when they are supportive and provide mentorship the DSPs developed more confidence in their own ability to provide quality services. In particular, supervisors or managers that still do some level of direct support were seen as more likely to understand daily challenges, advocate for staff, provide realistic guidance, and respond effectively during difficult situations. Further, they were more likely to "have their back" and create safe spaces to discuss concerns, opportunities to debrief, consistent access to resources, and leadership that supports DSPs with the same seriousness that organizations apply to supporting the people receiving services.

DSP EXPECTATIONS OF QUALITY

A significant part of the table discussions centered on how DSPs defined quality services for the people they support. The most common responses included individuals they support reaching their goals, developing confidence and new skills, advocating for themselves, feeling safe and comfortable, participating in their communities, building meaningful routines, and demonstrating joy when their DSP arrives. In addition to "big wins" they said the "little wins" are also just as important because they show progress in areas like communicating preferences, increasing independence, self-regulation, building trust, participating in their own plans, and/or trying new experiences.

One of the most important themes that emerged during the table discussions was that the vast majority of DSPs described the "human connection" as central to quality services. They stressed the importance of human interaction and developing trust, building rapport, providing consistency, promoting inclusion and developing a true understanding of the people they support. Quality direct support was not defined simply by task completion or compliance with documentation requirements, but by whether people are supported to move from "surviving to thriving."



IMPORTANCE OF GOOD JOB FIT

One of the supplemental questions DSPs were asked in the context of quality services centered on recognizing when it may not be a good job fit versus whether a new DSP may just need additional support and training. It was widely recognized among the DSPs that the profession is not for everyone and they said there are often signs that indicate there may be a mismatch between the person and the job. The DSPs identified the following as warning signs that the new DSP may not be a good fit for the position:

- Chronic exhaustion
- Frequent complaining
- Poor time management
- Unreliability
- Lack of initiative
- Limited communication
- Failure to ask questions
- Lack of engagement with individuals
- Excessive phone use
- Weak teamwork
- Impatience
- Lack of empathy

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There was shared concern about DSPs who treat the position as "just a job" or "just a paycheck," show little interest in the people they support, or fail to respect individual autonomy and boundaries. Other warning signs identified by the DSPs included bossiness, micromanaging, gossiping, oversharing, dismissiveness, favoritism, judgmental behavior, and taking interactions personally.

It was also recognized that poor performance may reflect inadequate training or organizational support rather than a lack of interest in the actual job. They identified signs that suggest someone needs more foundational training to develop the skills necessary to support individuals with a wide range of disabilities. Some of the indicators identified include:

- Comments such as "I didn't get enough training" or "I don't feel comfortable doing that yet"
- Genuine interest but persistent hesitation in responding to the needs of the individual
- Not good at establishing boundaries
- Overreacts to behaviors
- Easily overwhelmed and challenges prioritizing individuals needs

The DSPs said the distinction between someone who is bad at the job versus someone who just needs more training is very important because keeping people who are not a good fit for the job can cause major setbacks for the individuals they support and be destructive for team morale. However, for new DSPs who are genuinely interested, and have the heart for the job, they can develop their skills and become really good DSPs

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Understanding whether DSPs see themselves as remaining in the profession over the next five years provides important insight into the long-term stability and perceived viability of the direct support workforce as a career. In the context of workforce development, this information can be helpful for identifying strategies to address retention challenges - such as inadequate compensation, limited benefits, burnout, insufficient training and support, and unclear career pathways—that may prevent DSPs from having long-term careers in the field. The following table prompts about career development were asked to facilitate a deeper conversation about longevity in the DSP workforce and the factors that influence it:

- Where do you see yourself in 5 years? Why?
- Do you view the DSP profession as a viable career?
- Supplemental questions used to further the discussion included:
    - What would it take to build up and strengthen the DSP workforce?
    - Developmental services includes a wide variety of well-paid positions in service to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Were you aware of these positions and do you find these positions something to pursue in the career ladder of our field?

The majority of DSPs said they want to stay in the field of developmental services and a significant number said they wanted to continue to develop their careers as DSPs. While many hoped to continue as DSPs, others reported a desire to move into management, executive leadership, nursing, service coordination, behavioral support, education, advocacy, or program development roles. Some of the DSPs said they plan to gain experience and open their own programs including day programs, employment supports, and group homes.

A pain point for many of the DSPs centered on the fact that they want to develop their skills, have increased responsibilities, and expand their roles while maintaining meaningful relationships and contact with the people they support. However, they said the compensation is

a limiting factor and existing career advancement opportunities move them away from direct support and into increasingly administrative or "hands-off" positions. They expressed a desire to have a career pathway that allows them to advance without requiring them to stop providing direct support such as advanced practice DSPs, specializations, mentor positions, lead DSP classifications, and trainers that have a competency-based wage progression that reflects their responsibility and skill level.

The table discussions highlighted the stark contrast between the importance and value of direct support work and the limited public recognition, compensation, and professional recognition afforded to the workforce. DSPs expressed strong pride in their work and a deep commitment to the people they support, while also identifying on-going challenges related to wages, burnout, training, supervision, career advancement, public awareness, and professional recognition. During the report out, there was strong consensus of the collective desire to strengthen the profession, elevate DSP voices, create clearer career pathways, improve workforce supports, and build a broader movement that recognizes direct support as a distinct and essential profession.



PATHWAYS INTO THE DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSION

There were many different pathways in which DSPs entered the direct support field. For some, the profession was a natural extension of personal or family experiences with disability. Several participants described growing up with a family member with a disability, caring for someone on the autism spectrum, or having close relationships with people with IDD. Others said they had an immediate need for employment, were referred by friends or family members, internships, academic programs, or transitions from other fields. Some candidly shared that they initially "just needed a job" or "fell into" the work. However, many of these individuals reported remaining in the profession for years or even decades because they developed strong relationships with the people they supported and discovered a deeper sense of purpose in the work. It was common for DSPs to say that direct support work just "sucks you in" in a positive way.

DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSION AS A VIABLE CAREER

There were mixed views about whether the direct support profession currently constitutes a viable long-term career because it is undervalued in society as reflected by the wages paid for the job. Many participants believed that direct support can be a viable long-term career when DSPs have access to opportunities for professional growth, supportive management, meaningful benefits, and clear pathways for advancement. However, they also said that until DSP wages and benefits are sufficient to support themselves and their families, the profession will continue to face significant challenges and won't be seen as a viable long-term career.

STRENGTHENING AND PROFESSIONALIZING THE DSP WORKFORCE

The call to advance the DSP workforce resulted in DSPs identifying a broad range of strategies to strengthen the direct support profession. The top strategies identified included:

- Development of a competitive compensation structure that includes benefits and retirement
- Clearer career pathways and advancement opportunities;
- Stronger professional recognition;
- High-quality, in-depth, and ongoing training;
- Paid opportunities for continuing education;
- Mentoring and peer support;
- Supportive and accessible supervisors;
- Improved communication and routine check-ins;
- Greater autonomy and trust;
- Realistic workloads and expectations;
- Stronger DSP participation in decision-making;
- Improved matching between DSPs and the people they support;
- Partnerships with educational institutions and community organizations;
- Greater public awareness and visibility; and
- Stronger advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels.



EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND CAREER PATHWAYS

Meaningful education and training were also identified as a workforce priority for DSPs. The discussion centered on a recognized need for more comprehensive, practical, and ongoing training. They emphasized the need for training in communication, disability-specific supports, person-centered practices, medication-related issues, boundaries, crisis response, emotional regulation, advocacy, technology, documentation, and changing service expectations. There

was a strong interest in formal educational pathways that are specific to DSPs. Some of the ideas shared included college certificates, academic programs, "earn and learn" models, internships, partnerships with nursing and other professional programs, high school outreach, and specialized training pathways. One concept raised was the creation of a certificate model similar to educational pathways in early childhood education, potentially allowing DSPs to earn recognized credentials through a defined number of academic units.

SOCIETY'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSION WORKFORCE

The DSPs overwhelmingly believed that society does not know what a DSP is or understand what they do. Many felt that the public views DSPs simply as caregivers, babysitters, or individuals who "sit all day." They believe that the lack of public understanding contributes directly to low wages, limited recognition, undervaluation of the workforce, insufficient political prioritization, and limited investment in training, education, and development of career pathways . Several stated that if policymakers and the public truly understood the complexity and importance of the work, DSPs would receive greater compensation and support.

There was a strong desire to increase awareness of the DSP profession through public education campaigns, social media engagement, school-based awareness, community outreach, stronger media representation, and more opportunities for people with disabilities to be visible and included in community life.

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CAREER DEVELOPMENT

At the end of the summit DSPs reported feeling a strong sense of connection, validation, and shared purpose based on their interactions with other DSPs at the summit. Many were struck by how much they had in common despite working for different organizations, in different roles, and with individuals who have unique needs. The summit helped some DSPs recognize that the challenges they face are systemic rather than isolated to one worker or organization. The majority of DSPs said they felt supported, energized, hopeful, and inspired to advocate as a result of attending the summit.

One of the most significant themes that emerged during the table discussions was the need to develop a stronger professional identity. One of the DSPs said that they would no longer describe themselves as a caregiver but would instead proudly say, "I'm a DSP." Others expressed the importance of changing how DSPs talk about their own work and elevate the language used to describe their profession.

Several DSPs also said that they feel that the workforce has been operating in "survival mode," but that collective action could create meaningful change. They noted that the summit demonstrates the potential power of bringing DSPs, organizations, advocates, policymakers, and other stakeholders together around a common agenda.

The strongest message emerging from the discussions is that strengthening the DSP workforce requires a comprehensive professionalization strategy. Better wages are essential, but they must be accompanied by education, career pathways, supportive leadership, professional recognition, workforce voice, public awareness, and opportunities for advancement that do not require skilled DSPs to leave direct support.

The summit also generated discussion about next steps for the profession and a strong desire to develop a way for DSPs to remain connected to the larger workforce. They called for continued advocacy, stronger visibility, greater collaboration, and sustained opportunities to raise DSP voices.

A special thank you to our summit partners:

ARCA

CCLN
California Community Living Network

CA Policy Center
for Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities
—RESEARCH, POLICY AND ACTION—

CDSA California Disability Services Association