



## Training and Burnout: What Direct Support Professionals in Utah Say About the Top Two Predictors of Turnover

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Direct support professionals (DSPs) face struggles within and because of their employment. Interviews with direct support professionals in the State of Utah in various capacities reveal common issues and feelings throughout the profession. These include concerns regarding adequate and sufficient training, pervasive stress, and seemingly inevitable burnout. Previous quantitative results indicate that training and burnout were significant predictors of DSP's intent to stay in the workforce (Juhasz, Cutler, & Wappett, 2023). This report focuses on DSP's responses during follow-up interviews related to these two topics specifically.

### Sample

Interviews (N = 12) were conducted with DSPs employed in Utah.

### Demographics

- Age Range 20-62; Average = 37 years.
- Sex: 92% Female.
- Fields/Industry:
  - Day Program
  - Supported Employment
  - Academic or Educational
  - Private Citizen
- Job Titles:
  - Direct support professional
  - Support staff
  - Program manager/coordinator
  - Job coach
  - Respite aide
  - Special Education Teacher
  - Board Certified Behavior Analyst

### Training

100% of direct support professionals discussed training and certifications in their employment. Only 83% of participating direct support professionals had received training for their positions. Of those that reported, 100% felt that these trainings were insufficient. They expressed concerns surrounding the rigor and competence of the training required for their position, and they communicated the need for additional training for direct support professionals in the State of Utah.

Most participants openly stated that their training was unsatisfactory. They were “very frustrated with the lack of training and the inconsistencies in training.” One participant noted that current approaches to training promotes “a lack of understanding” for their clientele. Direct support professionals, their employers, and the individuals they support experience “damage... burnout... and stress” when they do not receive thorough training protocols. This generates direct support professionals “who don't know what they're doing.”

Many direct support professionals sought out additional trainings independent from those required by their workplace. Because of their passion for their work, they were eager to learn how to be efficient caretakers and supporters of their clientele. But they felt that, to be successful in their positions, they needed supplemental instruction.

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## Training Continued

One manager noted that their organization “can hire [direct support professionals] and have them sit on the floor working with people with disabilities not having any training.” Unqualified and untrained individuals are placed into environments without the awareness or experience to be suitably prepared, furthering burnout and stress within the workplace. This manager expressed that **“there is a problem with ... certifications and trainings from the State,” especially when factoring in the expenses that accompany trainings for a population with high turn-over rates.** The financial considerations of training an employee population with a transient nature create difficulties for employers who are seeking long-term and equipped direct support professionals. Factoring the cost of training coupled with the longevity of employees creates a barrier to success for organizations and their clientele.

**Individuals employed by private citizens** were informally given both trainings and informational resources by their employer. They shadowed guardians but did not receive or seek out official forms of instruction. If they had formal training, it was not obtained from their relevant employer and was not recent. One participant who previously worked in a privatized setting noted feelings of incompetence and inability because of lack of formalized instruction, stating that “more awareness and more training [were]... necessary to be able to do this job correctly.” The status of training in this capacity exemplifies the lack of standardization across the profession. Direct support professionals employed by private citizens complete similar tasks to those employed by organizations or companies but receive minimal to no training.

## Burnout and Stress

All but one participant felt stress and burnout directly related to their work as a direct support professional. The singular participant who did not feel stress directly related to their position worked less than 20 hours a week in a private setting for less than 6 months at the time of the interview. They did not have plans to continue working as a direct support professional but wanted to support individuals with disabilities in a biomedical setting.

While causes for these feelings varied, the participants all related them back to aspects of their employment. Many direct support professionals mentioned that their employment was “emotionally exhausting” and that they were under immense pressure. One felt **“constantly connected to work and the problems that were there,” while another detailed lying awake at night for hours thinking about issues he would have to face when he got to the office in the morning.** One participant said:

“Sometimes, when you're in the trenches, and there's a lot of things going on, ... it's just hard. And you can't make everybody happy. And you just feel like ‘why do I even do this? It doesn't make a difference’. ... then the sun will come out, and things get better and ... you're able to climb the hill. But it's exhausting. It's emotionally exhausting. It's physically exhausting. And it's mentally draining to do this year after year, day after day.

### The financial aspect of their employment

was often noted as a source of stress. The majority (89%) reported that they were paid insufficiently or sporadically. One direct support professional who worked for a private family shared that she never knew when she would be paid, which added a level of anxiety to her position. Another disclosed that the wage compression experienced within her organization contributed to tensions between managers, supervisors, and employees. Another participant explained that a newly hired direct support professional at her organization was forced to resign because of the financial instability characterized in the position. Funding for both individual employees and for programs contributed to high levels of stress amongst direct support professionals.

**Respite from job stress** took many forms, such as exercise, music, or creative outlets. Others cited “spending time with family” to be helpful. Many mentioned taking time off if possible, and a participant noted that she was “a better person” after taking time away from work to rejuvenate. Others committed to “leave work at work” as a boundary to reduce the stress induced by their employment situations.

A part-time position was the solution for many direct support professionals who felt overwhelmed by their work. Those who worked part-time, 20 hours a week or less, felt that their stress was more manageable. One part-time participant commented that “if I were full-time... I think that would definitely impact my decision to stay [in my position].”

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### References

Juhasz, A C, Cutler, S, Wappett, M (2023). Research brief: Exploration of Predictors of DSPs Intent to Stay or Leave the Utah Workforce. Logan, Utah: Utah State University, Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice

### Conclusions

Direct support professionals in Utah face many challenges in their employment. Many report feeling they are undertrained and are not provided with opportunities to further their qualifications, while inadequate funding dissuades employers from seeking training. Direct support professionals in the State of Utah are eager to learn and grow in their professional capacities. Responses in this evaluation suggest that DSPs frequently seek out additional training, and are willing to further their knowledge, however, systems that provide these types of opportunities are not accessible. A series of blockades impede improving training for these critical employees. The sincere call for change from the affected parties is an eye-opening look into the field of direct support. More can be done to improve and increase current training provided. However, we caution Utah policymakers from imposing additional requirements without carefully considering the costs and structural requirements for such changes.

DSPs face emotional and mental exhaustion in their professional environments, which often bleeds into their personal lives. While sources of stress and burnout are varied, the nature of the work, and finances were among the most common. Similarly, employees find multiple ways to cope with these stressors. These descriptions may be useful for employers as they consider how to reduce job related stress for employees.