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COVID-19 pandemic impact of the Pennsylvania ID/A Workforce crisis

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Abstract

A mid-pandemic survey of Pennsylvania agencies that provide supports and services to individuals who have intellectual disability revealed that the pandemic was associated with a worsening of the ongoing workforce crisis. Despite increased hourly wages and other financial supplements, Direct Support Professional turnover increased from 32% before the pandemic to over 51% during the pandemic. Vacant Direct Support Professional positions increased from just under 20% to approximately 23%. It is believed that the magnitude of this latter impact was mitigated by the decreased demand for staffing that resulted from the pandemic mandated closure of day programs and the subsequent reassignment of staff.

Keywords: COVID-19; intellectual Disability; workforce crisis; Direct Support Professionals

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the long-standing workforce crisis in the Intellectual Disability/ Autism (ID/A) field. In Pennsylvania, the pre-pandemic vacancy rate for Direct Support Professionals (Direct Support Professionals) approached 20%, and annual turnover was estimated to be approximately 32% [1]. These values were generally consistent with other temporally contiguous surveys [2]. The concern that initiated this survey was the widely expressed collective subjective impression of Pennsylvania providers at the time of this survey was that this pre-existing crisis has worsened subsequent to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As a result of the pandemic, agencies were increasingly challenged to hire Direct Support Professionals, those employees who provide direct support and services to individuals who have intellectual disability.

In an effort to verify and objectify these impressions, the Center for Disability Information set forth to collect data from Pennsylvania agencies that provide supports and service to individuals who have intellectual disability. In July 2021, all members of the PAR provider association were invited to participate in a survey regarding the workforce crisis. Participation in the survey was limited to those agencies that did business with the Pennsylvania Office of Developmental Programs and that could provide data related to Office of Developmental Programs business separated from other business. While this exclusion made the findings very specific to the Office Developmental Programs, they excluded a number of larger, multi-state, multi-funder agencies.

2. Sample

The sample consisted of 74 Pennsylvania agencies that provide Intellectual Disability/Autism (ID/A) services and supports through the Office Developmental Programs Home and Community Based Services waiver, ICF/ID funding, or base funding. These 74 agencies employed over 17,000 Direct Support Professionals. All regions of the Commonwealth

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were represented, and there was considerable variety with regard to size of organizations. Note that agencies responded only to those questions that pertained to the services they provide.

3. Turnover and Vacancies

The essence of the workforce crisis is that provider agencies are unable to hire a sufficient number of qualified individuals to work as Direct Support Professionals [3]. The demand for such individuals appears to be far exceeding the available supply. Our sample of 74 Pennsylvania provider organizations employed 14,756 full time Direct Support Professionals and 2,704 part time Direct Support Professionals as of July 2021. The mean hourly wage for full time Direct Support Professionals was \$14.35. For part time Direct Support Professionals, the hourly wage was \$14.21. Overall, the mean hourly wage paid by respondents was \$14.33. The mean starting wage for a Direct Support Professional was \$13.65 per hour.

In a pre-pandemic paper issued by a consortium of ID/A providers, Spreat [4] reported that the mean hourly wage for Direct Support Professionals was \$13.25. This rate represented an increase of just over 8%, largely attributable to a relief package provided by Pennsylvania aimed at increasing the wage paid to Direct Support Professionals. It is reasonable to suggest that the relief package may have somewhat mitigated the impact that the pandemic introduced to the ID/A workforce.

Turnover was estimated using the same formula as used by the Office of Developmental Programs. The formula is simply the number of individuals who separated from employment within a given time frame (typically one year) divided by the number of individuals working at a specific point in time. In this particular survey, respondents reported the number of Direct Support Professionals who left within a three month period (April through June 2021). This means that figures must be multiplied by four in order to achieve the commonly accepted annualized rate of turnover.

There were 14,756 working full time Direct Support Professionals, and 1897 full time Direct Support Professionals separated from their employment between 4/1/21 and 6/30/21. This translates to an annualized turnover rate of 51.4% for full time Direct Support Professionals. There were 2,704 working part time Direct Support Professionals, and 527 who separated from employment between 4/1/21 and 6/30/21. These figures comprise an annualized turnover rate of 78.0% for part time Direct Support Professionals. Combining full time and part time Direct Support Professionals, the aggregate annualized turnover rate was 55.5%, a figure that is consistent with PAR's earlier reported [5] rate of 56% and 75.6% higher than the reported pre-pandemic turnover rate (Spreat, 2018).

Vacancy rate was calculated by dividing the number of vacant (or empty) positions by the number of filled positions plus the number of vacant positions. There were 3839 vacant full time Direct Support Professional positions and 1448 vacant part time Direct Support Professional positions. These figures translate to a full time vacancy rate of 20.6% and a part time vacancy rate of 34.9%. The overall vacancy rate, combining full time and part time positions, was 23.2%. This index represents an increase of 19.6% over a pre-pandemic survey [4] It should be recognized that these vacancy figures may underestimate the magnitude of the problem because a number of day programs had not yet returned to full operation, and many day program staff have been reassigned to work in residential positions to fill vacancies.

It is reasonable that these turnover and vacancy figures underestimate the magnitude of the workforce crisis because most respondents report a heavy reliance on both management staff and day program staff to work in direct support positions during the crisis. 89.9% of respondent agencies reported that they have had to require management staff to perform increased levels of direct support services because of staffing shortages, and 88.4% of agencies that operate day program services have assigned day program staff to residential areas. If a provider had to pay overtime to replace the 1912 front line managers working an average of 20 hours per week, overtime costs would be projected to increase to 22.3%. If one estimates that just 1/3 of the unused day program hours were devoted to residential direct support, the projected overtime costs would increase to 35.4%.

The vacancy and turnover problems are not limited to Direct Support Professionals. Front line management staff are currently experiencing a 35.6% annualized turnover rate and a 13.5% vacancy rate. While these values are less than those reported for Direct Support Professionals, both are higher than previously reported values for this level of management. In 2018, Spreat reported [4] that frontline management turnover was 19.7% and vacancy rate was 9.2%. Current data represent increases of 80.7% in turnover and 46.7% in vacancies of front line management staff.

4. Recruitment

Most respondents (97.2%) reported that hiring Direct Support Professionals had become “more difficult” or “much more difficult” over the previous six months. Despite the fact that 10,476 individuals had applied for Direct Support Professional positions from 4/1/21 through 6/30/21, 97.2% of respondents said that the number of applicants was “not quite enough” or “grossly inadequate.” Given that only 12.6% of the applicants were actually hired into Direct Support Professional positions and only 75% of those hired actually worked longer than 30 days, the conclusion of inadequacy seems justified. This means that only 9.4% of the applicants for a Direct Support Professional position actually worked more than 30 days. Given the reported turnover and vacancy rate in combination with the hiring shortfalls, one might reasonably predict the continuation of the workforce crisis unless supply and demand are somehow balanced.

The hire rate is certainly affected by individuals who are double counted by applying to several agencies, however, the low hire rate seems surprising given that 47.2% of the respondents reported that the workforce crisis had forced them to become less selective in their hiring practices. The survey yielded no data that would offer meaningful explanations of this outcome.

Respondents reported the use of a variety of incentive programs to attempt to increase applicants for Direct Support Professional positions. The following actions were reported:

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| • Increased starting Direct Support Professional hourly wage by less than \$1 | 27.0% |
| • Increased starting Direct Support Professional hourly wage by more than \$1 | 50.0% |
| • Offered signing bonus for new employees | 54.1% |
| • Rewarded current employees for referring applicants | 79.7% |
| • Decreased selectivity in hiring | 45.9% |

5. Staffing Shifts

Ensuring that there are sufficient staff to ensure the safety of consumers has become an increasing challenge. Respondents reported that since 4/1/21, callouts have increased (61.8% of respondents) and use of overtime has increased (76.5% of respondents). Almost 90% of the respondents (89.9%) reported that they have increasingly had to rely on management staff to cover shift due to an insufficient number of Direct Support Professionals. They reported that management staff are now typically working about 20 hours per week providing direct supports. It was noted that 63% of the agencies have had to rely on upper level management to cover shifts.

During the period from 4/1/21 through 6/30/21, respondents reported that they paid Direct Support Professionals for 7,097,592 hours at regular pay and 1,314,818 hours on overtime pay. This means that 15.6% of monetary compensation paid to Direct Support Professionals was at an overtime rate. Approximately 76.5% of respondents reported that the use of overtime increased during this period. Increased callouts, typically resulting in additional overtime costs, were reported by 61.8% of respondents.

6. Residential Services and Supports

Respondents were asked how many individuals they were supporting in residential homes in March 2020 and in June 2021. They reported that 7,125 individuals were served/supported in 2020 and 6,860 in 2021. This is a decline of 265 individuals and approximately 3.7%. Slightly over 20% (21.8%) of respondents reported that staffing problems had forced their organization to reduce residential census. Approximately 48% reported that they have placed a cap on residential admissions due to staffing, and twenty (20) agencies (27% of the sample) reported that they closed at least one home between March and June of 2021. Seven organizations (9.5% of the sample) reported that they discharged individuals from residential supports because they couldn't get staffing. Eighty-four (84%) percent of respondents indicated that staffing challenges would force them to decline an ODP request to open additional residential services because of staffing challenges.

7. Day Program Services

Day Program services were closed for a significant period of time during Phase 1 of the pandemic and have only recently reopened. Over 80% of the respondents (81.6%) reported that staffing challenges have led them to either delay or reduce the opening of day program services.

Because of the closing of day program services, we selected a pre-pandemic date with which to compare current offerings. In October 2019, the respondents provided day programming for 7,068 individuals. This figure now stands at 4,193, a reduction of 2,875 individuals and 40.7%. The units of services suggested an even larger decline, suggesting that people may be returning at reduced hours in day programming. The units of service in October 2019 were 2,423,140, and the comparable figure for June 2021 was 2,423,140. This is a 61.4% decrease.

It should be noted that 88.4% of respondents offering day program services reported that some percentage of their day program staff were assigned to residential program components. In a sense, the need for support in the residential areas has taken precedence over day program services.

8. In Home Services and Supports

Survey respondents who provide in home services and supports billed for 556,424 units of service in March 2019. In June 2021, they billed for 431,788 units of service. This represents a decline of 22.4%. Over half of the respondents reported that they had a waiting list for in-homes supports, with a total of 327 individuals on those waiting lists. Earlier Pennsylvania research [6] suggested that In-Home supports had declined approximately 37% as a result of the pandemic.

9. Operations

As noted above, the current workforce crisis would appear to make most respondents (%) reluctant to respond affirmatively to an ODP request to increase levels of direct support services. Respondents went on to note that approximately one half (50.7%) are actively pursuing downsizing in response to the workforce crisis. Over half (55.9%) of respondents reported that they have had to defer any expansion plans due to the workforce crisis.

10. Conclusion

These mid-pandemic data present a troubling picture. Providers are unable to hire sufficient number of qualified Direct Support Professionals to perform necessary support functions. Management staff are required to work direct care. While residential services are largely being maintained, both day program services and in-home supports and services have not returned to anywhere near pre-pandemic levels. The ID/A field remains in crisis and without additional continued support, it risks implosion. Note that some providers have implemented steps to reduce their capacity to match their ability to staff programs. While this is one way to achieve a balance between supply and demand, it will create expanded waiting lists of people with ID/A.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

It is noted that Mr. Davis is President/CEO of a Pennsylvania provider association, and Dr. Spreat is employed by an agency that provides direct supports and services to people with intellectual disability/autism. Ms. Gruber is employed by a Pennsylvania provider association.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

Authors report no conflicts of interest in the conduct of this study.

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