

# **KANSANS MOBILIZING FOR DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE CHANGE**

*Presented by:*

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## BACKGROUND

The Kansas Council on Developmental Disabilities is federally mandated and funded under the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000. Council members are appointed by the Governor, and two-thirds of our membership are individuals with developmental disabilities or their immediate family members. The Council identified the shortage of qualified and competent Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) as their #1 priority and awarded a two-year grant to the University of Minnesota, Research and Training Center on Community Living. The Kansas University Center on Excellence in Developmental Disabilities and the Human Services Research Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, are subcontractors and substantial contributors to the our project, Kansans Mobilizing for Direct Support Workforce Change.

In the first year of the grant, an advisory board was created and selected 12 community service provider organizations to participate in the project. These organizations represented both urban and rural areas, large and small providers, with varied challenges and experiences. The overall goal of the project was to provide these organizations with the necessary tools to reduce their turnover and increase retention rates. The organizations were asked to join the advisory board to develop a comprehensive statewide workforce development plan to address the DSP shortage. They were also asked to pilot a variety of proven employment strategies and methods within their own organizations and report data on the effectiveness of those interventions. Each organization was asked for a two-year commitment in order to participate in the project and was promised a 25-30% decrease in their turnover rates and a 15-25% decrease in their vacancy rates.

We have just finished the first year of the grant, and I am pleased to share with you that all 12 organizations that started with us remain committed, and we have added three additional agencies as full participants in the project for the second year.

## THE INTERVENTION GROUPS

### Capacity Building

While each participating employer can anticipate a decrease in turnover or vacancy during the first two years in the project, the vision is to help increase capacity of all Kansas employers to make changes that improve recruitment and retention and to develop a state framework for the years ahead. This committee will develop a statewide workforce development plan to be used to advocate as needed for

change in the legislature and state and local governments. Capacity building will be guided by an advisory committee of people who can influence change in the state and who have important information to contribute to the vision of the project. Representatives from all organizations and additional leaders participate on the advisory board that meets quarterly. The board has identified increased wages and benefits, supervisor training, DSP training, program and policy issues surrounding consumer care and independence and professional recognition and image as priorities for the statewide plan.

### Supervisor Training

Poor supervision and problems with coworkers are common reasons DSPs give for leaving jobs. Changes in our support system mean supervisors spend less time working side-by-side with DSPs and have a more complex set of job skills they must apply. This intervention will create a group of well-trained and experienced supervisors who can serve as consultants and trainers to others in Kansas beyond the grant period. Employers who participate will receive advanced training for supervisors in three curricula, *Removing the Revolving Door*, *Peer Mentoring Program*, and *Power of Diversity*, which teach supervisory skills and principles proven to be effective in reducing turnover and increasing the number of people who apply for DSP positions.

Organizations assigned to this intervention group have been certified as trainers and involved in training activities within their own agency and cross training with each other. In the second year of the grant, these supervisory training opportunities will be expanded statewide and the Kansas trainers will lead the training.

### Technical Assistance

Each employer has a different set of circumstances and problems to overcome in finding and keeping employees. This group will guide employers in understanding how to identify problems and select and implement changes that will meet their most critical needs. Providers involved in this area will receive one-on-one technical assistance from an expert in workforce development to develop, implement and evaluate an organizational change plan to address specific recruitment or retention challenges.

The organizations assigned to this group are piloting employee referral bonus programs, staff satisfaction surveys, self-assessment tools, peer mentoring programs and participatory management practices.

### DSP Training: The College of Direct Support On-line Curriculum

Inadequate training reduces employee confidence and can lead to harmful mistakes. High potential employees who are poorly trained can be unnecessarily terminated or resign due to lack of understanding regarding important job skills. Training challenges include finding high quality, up-to-date training opportunities that are available in the times and locations that employees need. The College of Direct Support (CDS), a state-of-the art, multi-media, online training curriculum developed by the University of Minnesota, will address these challenges.

This group will customize the CDS by including information specific to Kansas. The training can be modified to meet the specific needs of each employer and is available to employees anytime and anywhere they can connect to the Internet. Current courses provide many important basic skills including health and safety, teaching methods and direct support professionalism, as well as training in more advanced skills such as positive behavior supports and cultural competence. Lessons are segmented and portions of each content area can be assigned according to the unique needs of each employee.

Feedback from the organizations involved in this group has been tremendously positive. One rural agency has already experienced a financial benefit by replacing traditional training with the CDS by reducing staff travel time to attend training and other related travel costs such as mileage, lodging and meals. In the second year of this grant all 15 organizations have access to the College of Direct Supports for all of their employees. Securing ongoing funding for CDS is a component of the statewide workforce development plan.

### Credentialing and Apprenticeship Training

Long term DSPs identify lack of career paths, repetitive training, and lack of recognition for contributions as reasons they leave direct support jobs, even if they enjoy the work. New employees complain about the lack of support in learning new duties and feeling overwhelmed and isolated. Employers and people receiving services find that length of employment doesn't necessarily mean employee skills improve over time. Credentialing and apprenticeship can improve employee skills by offering new opportunities for recognition and career growth. Apprenticeship offers a time-honored method of helping initiate employees into developing skills while on the job. Organizations involved

with this group will work with a larger coalition of stakeholders to develop the framework of an employer-based credentialing and apprenticeship program for the state.

This group has created the AD ASTRA Credential that will be one of the first programs to offer the national apprenticeship certificate in Direct Support. The National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals worked closely with the Federal government to identify direct support as an apprenticeable occupation. Two organizations will pilot AD ASTRA in the second year and identify strategies to sustain the program. The vision for AD ASTRA is a voluntary credential supported by a neutral, non-profit organization dedicated to increased opportunities, recognition and advancement for DSPs.

### Community Recruitment and Marketing Campaigns

Changes in demographics mean more employers are competing for a smaller number of employees. While turnover rates are historically about the same, recruitment possibilities have diminished and employers increasingly have to risk the reduction in quality of care as they accept less desirable candidates for positions that have less supervision. To turn this situation around, employers will need to improve recruitment and marketing practices. This intervention will develop a statewide strategy to improve the visibility and status of DSPs and will assist involved organizations to develop and implement specific marketing and recruitment strategies for their own sites that bring in a larger pool of potential candidates.

This group focused on the finding the “right” candidate for the job. They decided their biggest issue wasn’t getting people to walk in the door, it was choosing the person who would stay. All organizations received training on targeted recruitment, interview techniques, and Realistic Job Previews (RJP). A marketing “toolbox” of best practices was also created and distributed to all 15 organizations.

Small changes in organizational hiring processes have already resulted in positive outcomes. One agency designed photo scrapbooks that are specific to individual service sites. DSPs were given cameras and asked to take pictures of job duties that they felt were important to prospective applicants. Applicants went through the typical hiring process but also read through the scrapbooks. As a result the agency has enjoyed a significant decrease, from 55% down to 30%, in turnover of new hires during their first 3-6 months of employment.

The use of RJP is critical because statistics show that most turnover occurs within the first 3-6 months of employment, and this turnover is the most costly to employers. Another agency had a 1-day hiring process that included the interview, a visit to the service site, and an offer of employment all in the same day. Through this experience this agency has realized the value of extending their hiring process, using realistic job previews and “screening out” employees who will not stay.

A major undertaking for this group was the creation of a Realistic Job Preview video. This video is an unscripted documentary featuring DSPs, service recipients, family members, and supervisors. It shows the real thing – the positive and negative aspects of the job, what it takes to be a great DSP, and perspectives from individuals and their family members. All 15 organizations received a copy of this video and training on the use of the video during the hiring process. The agencies that assisted in the development of the video received a copy customized for their organization. This video is also available for purchase to organizations not involved in this project.

### IN CLOSING

We are only mid-way through our project, so data is not yet available to demonstrate the effectiveness of the interventions. However, we are so pleased that organizations are sticking with us, reporting positive outcomes and sharing their experiences with colleagues.

I do not believe that we were asked to talk to you today because we have the one solution that will solve the DSP shortage. The Council’s approach may be considered unique because it is comprehensive and addresses several issues that impact the workforce. The investment by the Council, \$300,000 for each year, was substantial and by far the largest grant we’ve ever awarded. However, when compared to the amount of money spent on developmental disabilities services, the high costs of staff turnover, or the negative impact on people’s lives when they don’t have readily available, qualified and competent DSPs, the investment is minimal.

Please feel free to contact me anytime for more details about our project. I would also gladly connect you with staff from the University of Minnesota, University of Kansas, Human Services Research Institute or the Kansas community service providers involved with the project.