



DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

The Frontline of Change

NYSACRA's Commitment to Action

January 2009

Today, more than 140,000 New Yorkers with developmental disabilities live and thrive in their home communities receiving unwavering support and a variety of services, thanks to direct support professionals. This system of care stands in stark contrast to what existed just forty years ago. Then, most individuals with developmental disabilities, who were unable to live independently, were confined to state institutions where services were self-contained.



This transformation was made possible through the vision and tireless efforts of parents, advocates, public policy makers, and individuals with developmental disabilities who spoke of their unique needs and desires. But its vanguard has been, and continues to be, direct support professionals—the men and women who assist individuals with developmental disabilities in mastering and enjoying the challenges and opportunities of everyday life.

In contrast to the “aides”

of institutions—whose role was largely maintaining order and security on often overcrowded wards—direct support professionals embrace more diverse and complex tasks. Their responsibilities include:

- assisting individuals to schedule, keep, and follow up on medical appointments with community physicians;
- administering medications and/or offering medication training;
- helping with healthy meal planning, grocery shopping, and food preparation;
- teaching basic living skills in residential, day program, and natural family settings;
- serving as coaches in vocational settings;
- supporting individuals in building relationships and social networks; and
- providing advocacy and protective services in troubling situations.

In incalculable and often intangible ways, direct support professionals make it possible for individuals to live and thrive at home and in their communities as good



**New York State Association
of Community and
Residential Agencies**
240 Washington Avenue Ext.
Suite 501, Albany, NY 12203
Phone (518) 449-7551
Fax (518) 449-1509
E-mail nysacra@nysacra.org
Web Site www.nysacra.org



Direct Support Professionals NYSACRA's Commitment to Action

neighbors and citizens. Working in thousands of small, sometimes one-on-one, care settings, they are required to exercise independent thinking and sound, ethical judgment.

Challenges

As an association dedicated to advocating for persons with developmental disabilities and the organizations that support them, NYSACRA has witnessed the fruits borne from the work of direct support professionals. It is also keenly aware that challenges threaten the vitality of the direct support workforce. Often, people working in these positions are neither viewed nor compensated as professionals. This leads to high turnover, and in conjunction with the ever increasing demand for willing and capable members, leaves a shrinking labor pool. If left unchecked, these challenges will place the system of supports and services in crisis, jeopardizing the quality of life for thousands of individuals with developmental disabilities.

During the past decade, NYSACRA has mobilized its resources to assist service provider organizations to build a solid, stable, and well qualified workforce. Today, NYSACRA is committed to redoubling its efforts in this regard by:

- providing access to high quality, competency-based training and career development opportunities for direct support professionals;
- promoting a national code of ethics and validated skill standards to guide the training and work of direct support professionals; and
- developing materials to educate the public and prospective employees about the significance of direct support work and careers in the profession.

Commitment to Action

Training and Career Development Opportunities

Disability Studies Certificate

Program: Since 2004, NYSACRA has administered a Disability Studies Certificate Program in upstate New York. Similar programs are also administered by agencies in New York City and on Long Island. The program's objectives are to train direct support professionals to meet the requirements of a changing service system and to provide the foundation for longer-term employment and career mobility in the field. In partnership with the State University of New York, the program entails a twelve-week, non-credited college preparatory course; four

job-related, college-level courses bearing a total of 12–16 college credits; and completion of the online College of Direct Support curriculum. Tuition costs are paid by NYSACRA. At any time, two hundred direct support professionals participate in the program and their numbers are expected to grow.

College of Direct Support: The College of Direct Support provides a learning gateway for best practices in the field of direct support. It offers a nationally recognized curriculum and, being web-based, is easily accessible and flexibly responsive to the needs of direct support staff facing demanding schedules and difficulty traveling off-site. Some of the course topics include: person-centered planning and supports; supporting healthy lives; individual rights and choice; and community inclusion. Over the years, NYSACRA has gained access to the College of Direct Support for those individuals enrolled in the Disability Studies Certificate Program. Beginning in 2008, NYSACRA has become a Master Administrator for the oversight, marketing, and dissemination of the College of Direct Support's on-line training program, thereby offering service agencies in New York access to the program.

National Training Institute for Frontline Supervisors: NYSACRA also supports the University of Minnesota's National Training Institute for Frontline Supervisors. This three year project refines, tests, and delivers a national train-the-trainer and technical assistance model to assist community organizations that provide supports and services to recruit, retain, and train direct support and frontline supervisory staff members.

Promoting a National Code of Ethics and Validated Skill Standards

The National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals (NADSP) is a coalition of organizations and individuals committed to enhancing the quality of human service endeavors by strengthening the direct support workforce. Toward that end, NADSP:

- developed a national code of ethics to serve as a guide in resolving issues direct support professionals face in their jobs each day;
- promoted the Community Support Skill Standards, developed by the Human Services Research Institute with funding from the United States Department of Labor, as critical tasks in which direct support professionals should evidence competency; and



- established a national credentialing program for direct support professionals working in community programs.

NYSACRA has begun to work with direct support professionals to form a New York Chapter of the NADSP to advance its code of ethics, national credential in direct support, and overall goal of professionalizing the career of direct support. NYSACRA will provide the initial registration fees for NADSP membership, create and maintain a website for the chapter, and work with NADSP leadership to organize six regional direct support professional conferences each year. After this initial support from NYSACRA the New York Chapter of NADSP will become an autonomous entity.

Public Education

Recruiting and retaining a knowledgeable and committed direct support workforce also requires educating

the public-at-large about the value of the profession and prospective employees about career paths and the reality of the work. Toward that end, NYSACRA is:

- developing public service announcements for various media outlets to increase the public's awareness of the roles of direct support professionals;
- designing printed materials for distribution at career and educational opportunity centers and community colleges to provide clear and consistent information about various employment opportunities within the profession; and
- filming and distributing realistic job previews for use by service providers to give potential employees detailed and balanced information about job expectations so they can make informed decisions about working in the field.



Direct Support Professionals NYSACRA's Commitment to Action

Everyone's Challenge — Everyone's Responsibility

New York State's system of supports and services for individuals with developmental disabilities today is leading the country. Challenges to the direct support workforce, however, threaten those supports and services, not just in New York, but across the nation.

New York can take a leadership role in averting this looming crisis by promoting the work of direct support as a profession. That task, just as the creation of today's service system, will take the work of many.

- *Service provider agencies* should ensure that: they promote continuing education for direct support staff; internal training programs are competency based; prospective employees are exposed to the genuine expectations of the job; and career ladders of increasing responsibility and commensurate compensation exist for direct support staff.

- *Prospective and current direct support professionals* can also act. Individuals seeking a future in direct support work should discuss educational and career advancement opportunities with potential employers and choose

service organizations with which they can grow, prosper, and have a career. Current direct support staff should also talk to their employers about advancement, taking every opportunity to grow with the service provider agency, and through this, paving the way for new generations of staff by acting as role models and mentors, and embracing them in the shared goal of providing quality services through professional growth and development.

- *Individuals with developmental disabilities and their families* can act to ensure that quality services are delivered professionally by qualified personnel. In searching for prospective provider agencies, they can inquire about each agency's efforts to recruit and retain a well-qualified and trained direct support workforce, and choose the service provider agency with which they are most satisfied based on these inquiries and other factors. Individuals and their families already affiliated with a service provider agency should make similar inquiries and be sure to share their unique experiences on these matters with the service provider agency's leadership.

- *Finally, public policy makers* should examine the degree to which regulations, funding methodologies, and public policies support a well-qualified, professional direct support workforce. Critical

questions include: do state and federal government human service and labor agencies have adequate mechanisms in place to monitor the supply and demand, salaries and benefits, and turnover rates of direct support professionals across the various human service industries? Are the roles of public and private sector direct support staff sufficiently different to justify wide salary differentials, and if not, what actions can be taken to create parity? Do regulations and funding methodologies promote professional growth, development, and career ladders for staff? And, are policies in place to ensure cost of living salary adjustments for direct support professionals across all programs regardless of whether the program is state or federally funded?

The future success of today's system of services for individuals with developmental disabilities is inextricably linked to the degree to which the men and women who support them each day are nurtured and valued as professionals. This brief presents NYSACRA's commitment to action toward that end, an end, which requires us all to act together.

To learn more about direct support professionals, their work and challenges, NYSACRA's commitment to action, and what others can do, visit Publications, under Resources, at www.nysacra.org.