

What If DSP Recognition Lasted All Year?

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There are so many issues negatively affecting the direct support professional (DSP) workforce. From poverty-level wages, to limited career development opportunities, to staggering turnover – it often feels like the ‘crisis’ is unsurmountable to overcome. It’s clear that there are complexities to these problems and a multitude of factors hindering deep-rooted change. Consequently, and justifiably, human service organizations face challenges in identifying what actions to take.

We all know that the work of DSPs is absolutely essential – and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has only amplified this fact – but their contributions to improving the lives of people with disabilities often go unnoticed.

As a gesture of acknowledging and demonstrating appreciation for DSPs, National Direct Support Professional Recognition Week was established years ago, to simply say “thank you.” Organizations have pulled together some genuinely positive and uplifting efforts to express their gratitude throughout DSP Recognition Week, including pizza parties, car washes, gift bags, award ceremonies, and more.

While these are all very commendable endeavors it logically leads to the question, “what if DSP recognition lasted all year?” How could we extend it to the other roughly 358 days? What initiatives might have a longer-lasting effect on DSPs?

National DSP Recognition Week: 7 Days Isn’t Enough

This year for National DSP Recognition Week, which took place from September 13 – 19, 2020, we teamed up with the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP). We collaborated on a campaign to collect and share programs that lift up and bolster DSPs throughout the entire year. We requested that organizations submit their initiatives. Our hope was that it might inspire other agencies to strengthen their efforts in supporting DSPs.

Organizations Truly Did Deliver

We received nearly two dozen submissions of initiatives that either empower and/or acknowledge DSPs in substantial ways. Whether it was profile stories about DSPs shared in newsletters or staff development tied to financial incentives – there were many programs that other organizations could replicate to improve the professional and personal lives of DSPs.



DSP Programs That Make An Impact

During the week, CQL shared these programs on both our Facebook and Twitter social media channels. Through extensive engagement and sharing on social media, the articles received nearly 1,000 page views on our website. Based on that exposure, these initiatives have the potential to make a big impact on the human services field as a whole, and DSPs specifically. You will find a broad overview of each program below. We encourage you to read the full articles so you can learn how similar programs could be implemented by your organization.

Professional Development For DSPs

The Arc of Monroe described their Succession Development program, which connects professional development and career advancement for DSPs. Following 28 hours of coursework, DSPs obtain mentorship from a member of the organization's leadership team. This has resulted in most participants receiving a promotion within one year of completing the program.

To realign itself as a learning organization, Family Residences and Essential Enterprises, Inc. (FREE) created the Center for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD). Beyond the immediate benefits of improving skills and education, DSPs also receive monetary incentives for completing the program's training. FREE has attributed the CLPD to improvements in DSP retention and positive feedback in satisfaction surveys from various stakeholders.

Supporting DSPs During COVID-19

In the midst of COVID-19, essential workers like DSPs have remained committed to carrying out their work while still balancing personal responsibilities involving their own families. To support DSPs with these competing demands, The Arc Mid-Hudson set up a childcare initiative to alleviate some of the pressures of the pandemic. The organization was able to offer DSPs a childcare subsidy of up to \$200 per child per week, for up to 3 children per household.

“I was up against a wall to take care of my family while we faced so much stress with the coronavirus. This program helped me so much.”

- Stacie, The Arc Mid-Hudson

The Arc of Dutchess' Board of Directors and The Arc of Dutchess Foundation created the Wishes & Wants Fund to ease some of the stresses of their DSPs' daily work during the pandemic. Through two separate initiatives involving meals and activities, the program provides funds to support DSPs and cultivate an uplifting environment.

Acknowledging DSPs All Year

To recognize DSPs throughout the entire year and promote a positive organizational culture, Trinity Services, Inc. launched the Lille Leapit Awards to highlight excellence across their agency. Through a nomination and approval process, DSPs and other employees can be acknowledged for their work performance and/or alignment with Trinity's 10 Core Values. This program has undoubtedly helped DSPs and others feel appreciated and valued.

“I feel so accomplished. I am grateful that my efforts have been noticed.”

- Hamed Lawal, Trinity Services, Inc.

In an effort to acknowledge DSPs for going above and beyond in their work, LIFE Designs created The Kudos Program. Organizational team members are provided with a set of cards that they can distribute at their discretion for excellence in direct support. In addition to the recognition itself, the Kudos Cards allow DSPs to be eligible for a monthly gift card drawing. This is another example of an organization working to build and reinforce a positive culture.

The Enriching Lives / Employee Spotlight program, developed by Mountain Lake Services, celebrates specific DSPs and showcases their contributions through profile stories in the organization's newsletter. The program was incorporated as part of their CQL Person-Centered Excellence Plan – connected to their CQL Accreditation. It has helped create a sense of unity and camaraderie across the organization, which is spread across a large rural area.

Let's Extend DSP Recognition

We would like to share our deep gratitude to all of the organizations that submitted their programs and initiatives that empower direct support professionals. You have demonstrated a deep dedication to this essential workforce.

While these are only a handful of examples of programs, they all have the potential to make a meaningful and long-lasting impact on DSPs. We know that there are many more out there. At the very least, hopefully these programs will help spark similar initiatives at other agencies in the human services field. Or even better, inspire organizations to develop their own unique, creative solutions to confronting issues that affect the DSP Workforce.

Thank you, direct support professionals – today, tomorrow, and throughout the entire year.