

2020 REPORT

# Stability of the Direct Support Professional Workforce Providing Residential Supports to Adults With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in Oregon



## Introduction

Many adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) rely on Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) to provide quality support on a daily basis. The support of DSPs is crucial for helping adults with I/DD live in community settings, maintain their health and well-being, have successful work and social lives, and develop and maintain independent living skills. However, the work is challenging and often comes with low pay, limited benefits, and little social status or recognition of the importance of the DSP role.<sup>1</sup> High turnover is common. Unfortunately, high turnover is also costly and dangerous. It impacts the continuity and quality of care available to adults with I/DD, increases burdens on remaining staff, and contributes to long wait-lists for services.<sup>1</sup> These issues may amplify risk for medication errors, injuries, and abuse and neglect of adults with I/DD.<sup>2</sup> High turnover has substantial budget implications for agencies that must continually recruit and train new staff. Estimates of the cost of replacing a single DSP range from \$2,413 to \$5,200.<sup>1</sup> With large numbers of DSP positions needing to be refilled the cumulative cost is massive, reaching an estimated \$2,338,716,600 per year nationally.<sup>1</sup> As such, DSP turnover is a centrally important issue to understand and address. The purpose of this report is to examine DSP turnover in Oregon, analyze factors associated with high versus low turnover, and propose strategies to reduce turnover.

## Data Source

This report uses data from the 2018 National Core Indicators Staff Stability Survey. National Core Indicators (NCI) is a collaboration between the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services, the Human Services Research Institute and participating state developmental disability agencies. The NCI Staff Stability Survey collects data on DSP workforce that provides direct support to adults with I/DD. Survey results provide participating states with important data on workforce challenges, benchmarks to assess their own state's performance compared to other participating states, and a means of assessing changes following policy or programmatic initiatives that affect the DSP workforce.<sup>3</sup> In 2018, 26 states plus the District of Columbia participated in the NCI Staff Stability Survey. This report focuses specifically on data from Oregon agencies that provide 24-hour residential services to adults with I/DD living in group homes.

## Statistical Terms

There are several statistical terms included in this report. Brief explanations of these terms are provided below.

**MEAN** – The mean (sometimes called an average) is the sum of a set of data points divided by the number of data points. For example, to calculate the mean daily rainfall during a given month, we add up the rainfall from all of the days in that month and then divide by the number of days in the month.

**MEDIAN** – The median is the “middle” value between the upper and lower halves of a set of data. Unlike the mean, the median is less likely to be influenced by extreme values that differ dramatically from the rest of the data.

**PERCENTILE** – Percentiles are values below which a certain percentage of the data fall. At the 10th percentile, 10% of the values in the data range are below the 10th percentile value. At the 25th percentile, 25% of the values are below that point. (The median is the 50th percentile.)

**QUINTILE** – Quintiles divide the data into five equal segments. Each segment contains 20% of the data distribution. When we present data on turnover, we will examine differences between agencies in the top quintile (the 20% of agencies with the highest turnover) and those in the bottom quintile (the 20% of agencies with the lowest turnover).

**CORRELATION** – Correlation measures the extent to which two variables are related. If the variables are positively correlated, when one variable increases the other one does too. If the variables are negatively correlated, when one variable increases the other one decreases.

**T-TEST** – A t-test is a statistical test used to compare the means of two groups to determine if they are similar or different.

**P-VALUE** – When conducting a statistical test, the p-value is the probability of obtaining test results at least as extreme as the results actually observed, purely by chance. A commonly used p-value cutoff is 0.05, meaning there is only a 5% probability that the observed association was due to random chance.

**SIGNIFICANT** – Statistical significance means that the observed relationship between variables is most likely caused by something other than chance. For this report, when the p-value for a statistical test is less than 0.05, we describe the result of the test as statistically significant. If the p-value is between 0.05 and 0.10, we note that there is a trend toward a significant association.

## DSP Workforce Description

### DSP Roles and Tasks

On average, Oregon group homes have 3–4 residents. DSPs in group homes provide 24-hour wrap-around care to these residents. DSP tasks can vary widely and often include assisting with personal care, dispensing medications, monitoring client behaviors and safety, teaching independent living skills, setting up appointments, and transporting clients to locations outside the home.

### Size of the Oregon DSP Workforce

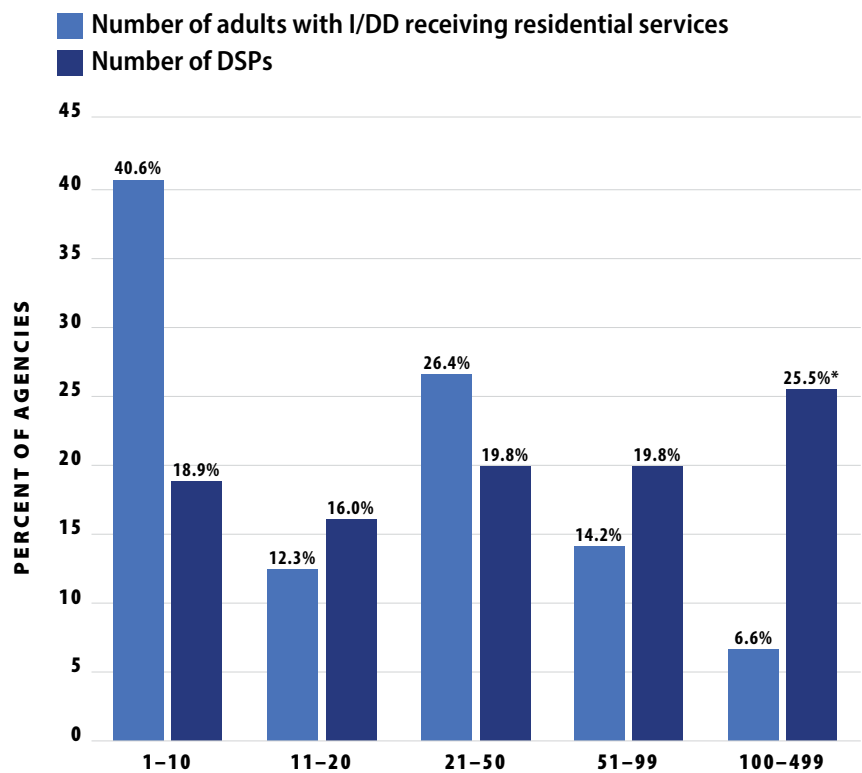
The agencies providing residential services in Oregon range from those serving 1–10 adults with I/DD to those serving 100–499 adults. Most agencies in Oregon are small, with more than half serving 20 or fewer adults with I/DD. Only seven Oregon agencies provide residential services to more than 100 adults (per agency) with I/DD (see Figure 1). In 2018, 106 I/DD residential service provider agencies in Oregon participated in the NCI Staff Stability Survey. These agencies employed a total of 8015 DSPs. Of these DSPs, 15% were part-time workers and 77% were full-time; the remaining 8% worked at agencies that did not distinguish between full-time and part-time DSP positions. The number of DSPs per agency ranged from 4 to 535 (Figure 1). The average number of DSPs per agency was 76 and the median number was 45.

### Demographic Characteristics of the DSP Workforce

Demographic information is not currently collected in the NCI Staff Stability Survey so we do not have specific demographic data available for DSPs in Oregon. However, national data indicate the vast majority (87%) of DSPs are female; the median age is 47 years.<sup>4</sup> Nationally, 60% of DSPs are people of color and 29% are immigrants.<sup>4</sup>



**FIGURE 1**  
Size of Oregon Agencies Providing Residential Services to Adults with I/DD



Data source: National Core Indicators Staff Stability Survey, Oregon, 2018  
\*Includes one agency with more than 500 DSPs



## DSP Wages and Benefits

### Wages

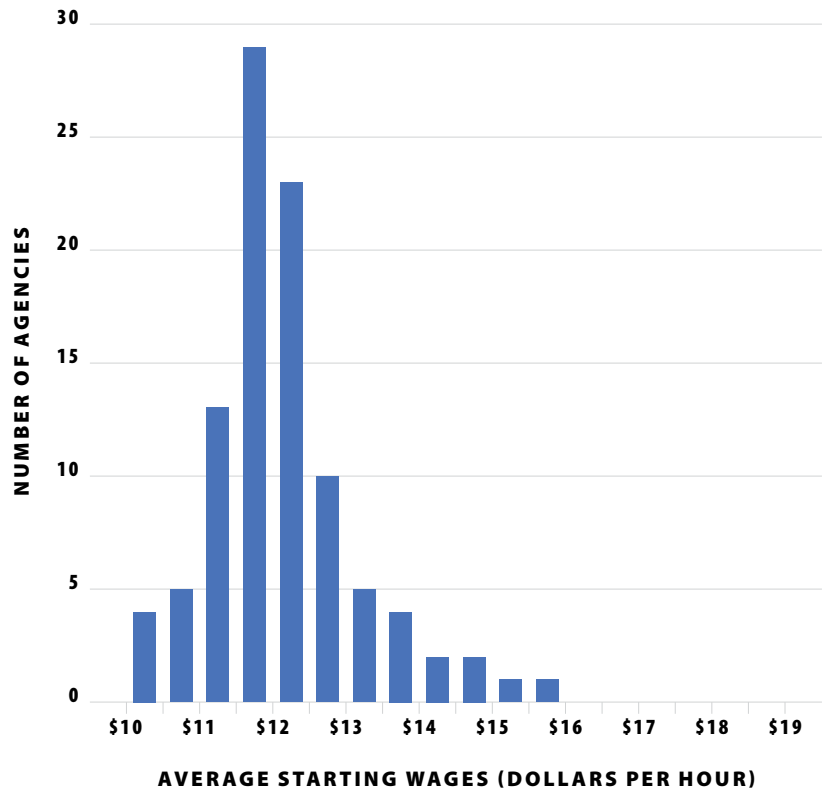
In 2018, starting pay for DSPs providing residential care ranged from \$10.25 to \$16.00 per hour, depending on agency (Figure 2). The mean starting pay for residential DSPs in Oregon was \$12.27 per hour, and the median was \$12.00.

Average wages across all tenure groups were only slightly higher than starting wages. Average wages at different agencies ranged from \$10.25 to \$18.39 per hour (Figure 3). The state-wide mean was \$13.32 per hour, and the median was \$13.20. Neither starting pay nor average pay differed significantly in large versus small agencies or in for-profit versus non-profit agencies.

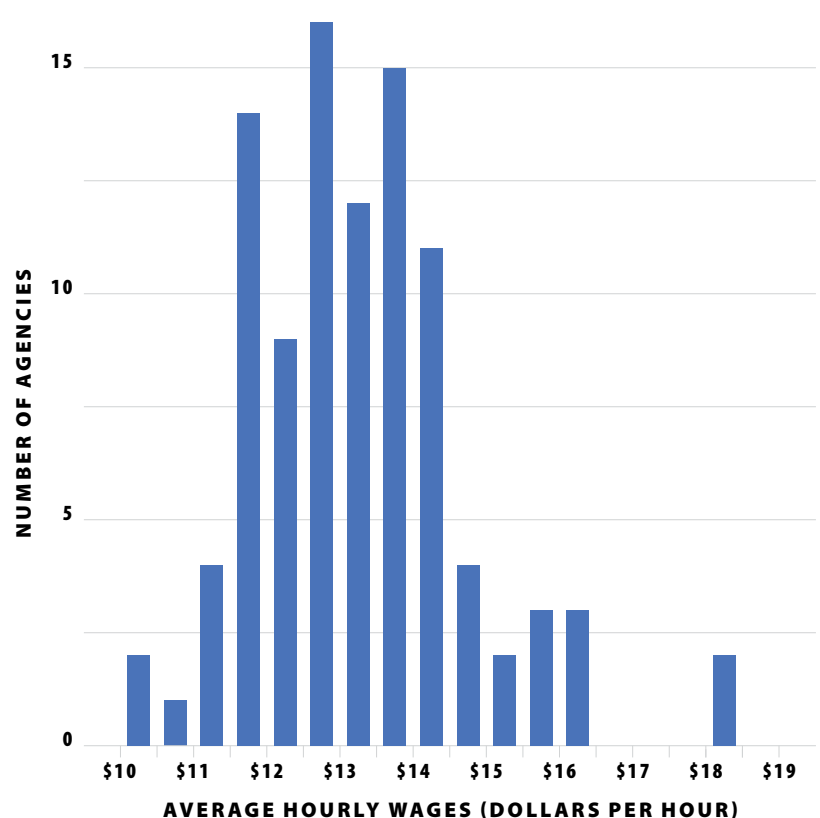
Wages for DSPs were considerably lower than those for the Oregon workforce as a whole. According to 2018 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the mean hourly wage for the overall Oregon workforce in 2018 was \$25.00 and the median was \$19.03.<sup>5</sup> The median (50th percentile) hourly wage for DSPs (\$13.20) was below the 25th percentile of hourly pay rates for the broader Oregon workforce (\$13.43).<sup>5</sup>

The median DSP wage in Oregon was barely sufficient to be considered a living wage for one adult in Oregon in 2018.<sup>3</sup> It was well below what would be needed to support one adult and one child, or a household with two adults and two children even if the other adult was also working.<sup>3</sup> The lower end of the DSP wage range was consistent with Oregon's standard (outside of the Portland metro area) minimum wage for the July 1, 2017 through June 30, 2018 fiscal year.<sup>6</sup> At these wages, a DSP working full-time was making less than 138% of the Federal Poverty Level for a household of two.<sup>7</sup> Thus, many DSPs met income eligibility criteria for coverage under the Oregon Health Plan.

**FIGURE 2**  
Starting Wages for Oregon DSPs Providing Residential Care



**FIGURE 3**  
Average Wages for Oregon DSPs Providing Residential Care



## Benefits

The Staff Stability Survey asked agencies whether or not they provided each of the following benefits:

- Paid time off—either in the form of pooled time off or specified as paid vacation, paid sick time, and/or paid personal time off
- Health insurance coverage
- Dental insurance coverage
- Vision insurance coverage
- Retirement plan
- Reimbursement or other support (e.g., tuition assistance) for post-secondary education
- Employer paid job-related training
- Employer-sponsored disability insurance
- Flexible Spending Accounts
- Health incentive programs (e.g., gyms, yoga, smoking cessation)
- Life insurance

Several agencies provided none of these benefits. Only 3 agencies provided all 11 types of benefits. On average, agencies provided 5–6 benefits. There was a strong positive correlation between agency size and number of benefits offered ( $r=0.73$ ,  $p<0.001$ ); larger agencies provided more benefits. There was also a strong association between agency type and number of benefits offered ( $t=7.41$ ,  $p<0.001$ ); non-profit agencies provided significantly more benefits than for-profit agencies did.

Agencies also were asked if they utilized the following staff retention strategies:

- Realistic job preview
- Code of ethics training
- DSP career ladder to retain highly skilled workers
- Support to acquire credentials through a state or nationally recognized professional organization

Several agencies did not employ any of these strategies. However, 12 agencies utilized all 4 strategies. The median number of retention strategies per agency was 2. We did not find significant differences by agency size or type in the number of retention strategies agencies provided.

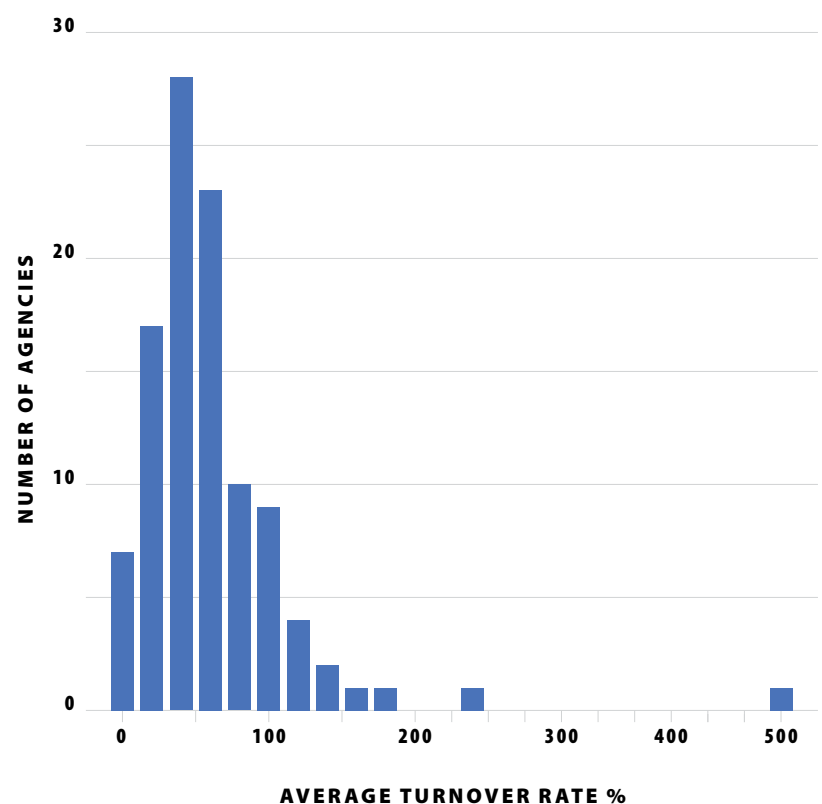
## DSP Turnover, Tenure, and Vacancy Rates

### Overall Turnover Rate

The overall turnover rate was calculated by dividing the total number of DSP supporting adults with I/DD on each agency's payroll as of December 31, 2018 by the number of DSPs who had departed the agency between January 1, 2018 and December 31, 2018.<sup>3</sup> Turnover varied widely by agency, ranging from 0% to 500%, although all but 2 agencies had turnover rates below 200% (Figure 4).

The median turnover rate in Oregon in 2018 was 50% and the mean turnover rate was 61%. Oregon's median exceeded that in 22 of the 26 other states participating in the 2018 Staff Stability Survey, placing Oregon in the top 19% of states with the highest turnover.<sup>3</sup> Agency size and agency type (for-profit versus non-profit) were not significantly associated with turnover rates.

**FIGURE 4**  
Overall DSP Turnover Rates in Oregon



## Turnover Rate by Staff Tenure

We calculated turnover rate separately for DSPs employed less than 6 months, between 6 and 12 months, between 12 and 24 months, between 24 and 36 months, and more than 36 months. The highest turnover was among those with a job tenure of less than 6 months. Turnover decreased as staff tenure increased. However, the mean turnover rate was well above 50% in all tenure groups except those who had been employed as DSPs for 3 years or longer. The median turnover rate was above 50% in all groups with employment tenure less than 2 years (Table 1).

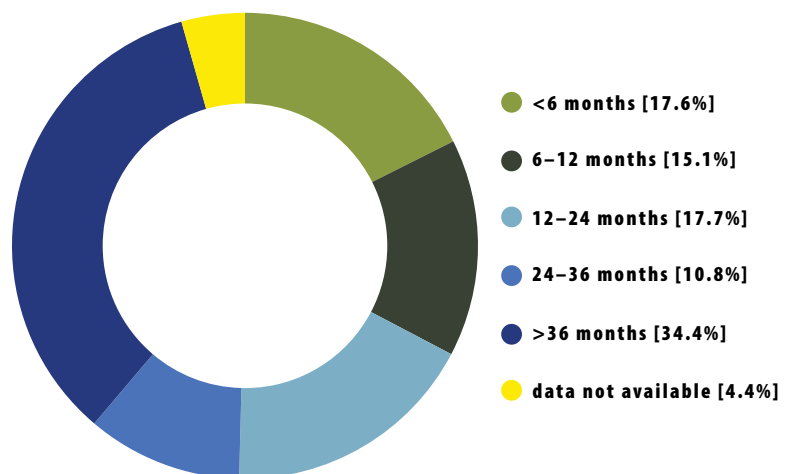
## Tenure of Current Staff

High turnover rates mean that relatively few DSPs have a long tenure. Thus, a substantial proportion of the DSP workforce consists of less experienced personnel. In 2018, fewer than half of DSPs had been on the job longer than two years, and only about one third had been on the job for more than 3 years. Nearly one third had less than one year of experience (Figure 5).

**TABLE 1**  
Turnover by DSP Tenure Category

TENURE CATEGORY	RANGE IN TURNOVER RATES	MEDIAN TURNOVER RATE	MEAN TURNOVER RATE
< 6 months	0 – 2,500%	127%	202%
6 – 12 months	0 – 1,600%	78%	122%
12 – 24 months	0 – 400%	53%	70%
24 – 36 months	0 – 500%	40%	63%
> 36 months	0-100%	21%	25%

**FIGURE 5**  
Tenure of Current DSPs



## Vacancies

High turnover also increases the likelihood of positions remaining unfilled for some period of time, resulting in potential gaps in care. As of December 31, 2018, 10.7% of full-time DSP positions and 14.3% of part-time DSP positions were vacant statewide. These rates are higher than those in 44% of the other states that provided vacancy data in as part of their NCI Staff Stability survey.<sup>3</sup>

We did not find a significant association between agency size and vacancy rates, or between agency type (for-profit or non-profit) and vacancy rates.

## Reasons for Departure

The majority (68%) of DSPs who departed their jobs left voluntarily, while 26% were terminated. The reason for departure was unknown for the remaining separated DSPs.

The NCI Staff Stability Survey collects data at the agency level rather than from individual staff. Thus, we do not have specific information about why DSPs who left voluntarily chose to leave. Anecdotally, DSPs have reported that the work is challenging and the pay is lower than they could receive elsewhere for easier work. In the following section, we examine associations between compensation and turnover and vacancy rates.

## Relationship of Compensation with Turnover and Vacancy Rates

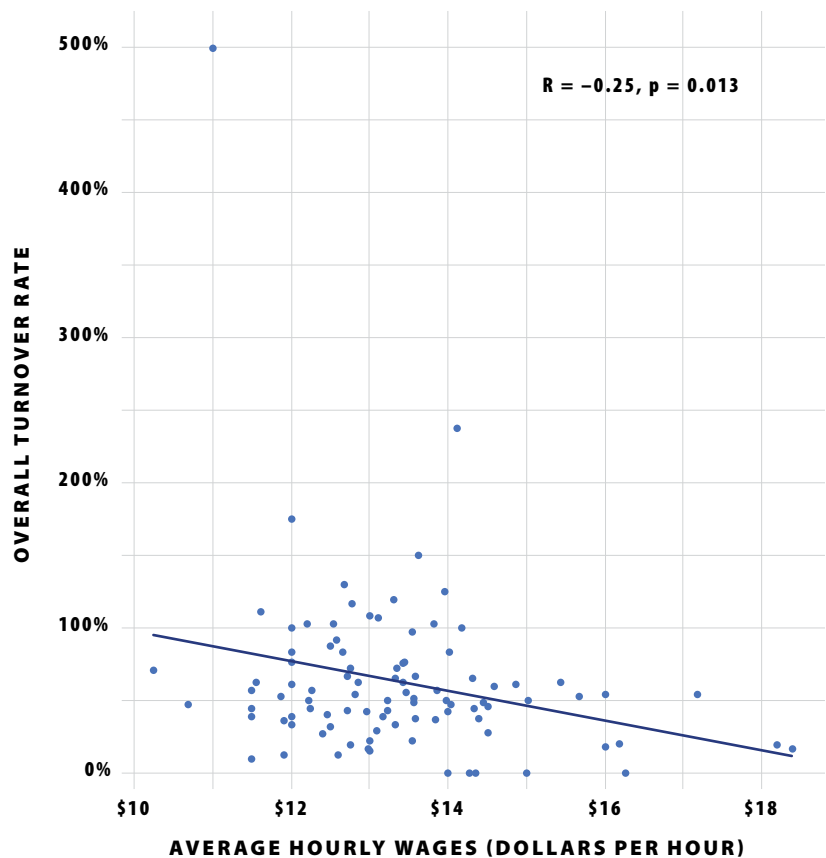
### Association of Wages with Turnover and Vacancies

We found a significant negative correlation between average hourly wages of DSPs working in residential settings and overall turnover rate ( $r = -0.25, p = 0.013$ ). As average hourly pay increased, the turnover rate decreased (Figure 6).

We also compared average pay in agencies with the lowest and highest turnover rates. Agencies with the least turnover were those in the bottom quintile (lowest 20%) of the range of turnover rates. Agencies with the highest turnover were those in the top quintile (highest 20%) for turnover. We found that agencies with the least turnover had significantly higher average wages (\$14.35 per hour) than agencies with the most turnover (\$12.93 per hour) ( $t = 2.66, p = 0.007$ ).

We did not find a significant association between wages and percent of positions that were vacant.

**FIGURE 6**  
Correlation between Average Hourly Wages and Turnover



### Association of Benefits with Turnover and Vacancies

Most of the individual benefits and retention strategies asked about in the Staff Stability Survey were associated with lower turnover, but few of the associations were statistically significant. Moreover, the correlation between number of benefits offered and turnover rates was not statistically significant. However, the following specific benefits and retention strategies were significantly associated with lower turnover rates:

- Financial assistance with post-secondary education ( $t = 2.25, p = 0.02$ ). Agencies that offered this benefit had a mean turnover rate 20.3 percentage points lower than agencies that did not provide financial assistance with education.
- Employer paid job-related training ( $t = 1.95, p = 0.03$ ). Agencies that provided this benefit had a mean turnover rate 23.5 percentage points lower than agencies that did not pay for job-related training.

- Support with credentialing ( $t = 1.90, p = 0.03$ ). Agencies that supported DSPs in obtaining relevant credentials had a mean turnover rate 18.6 percentage points lower than agencies that did not provide such support.

In addition, there was a trend toward a significant association between provision of vision coverage and turnover ( $t = 1.43, p = 0.08$ ). On average, agencies that offered vision coverage had a turnover rate 18.5 percentage points below those that did not offer vision coverage. Many DSPs may be able to obtain health care and dental coverage through the Oregon Health Plan. However, vision coverage is not available to most Oregon Health Plan members. Thus, the need for vision coverage may be high among DSPs.

We did not find significant associations between individual benefits and vacancy rates or between number of benefits offered and vacancy rates.

## Summary and Recommendations

The state of the Oregon DSP workforce is dire. Nationally, worker shortages and high levels of turnover among DSPs have been described as a crisis.<sup>1</sup> Turnover in Oregon is even higher than the national average. In fact, with a median turnover rate of 50% among DSPs working for agencies that provide residential care to adults with I/DD, Oregon's turnover is higher than all but 4 of the 26 other states that participated in the 2018 NCI Staff Stability Survey. Action is urgently needed to reduce turnover and improve continuity of care for adults with I/DD.

Based on the findings of our analyses, we recommend the following strategies to reduce turnover:

- 1. Increase hourly wages.** In our analyses, higher wages were associated with lower turnover. That finding confirms prior data showing the same association nationally.<sup>8</sup> In Oregon, state support for DSP wages has not been adjusted for cost of living increases since 2015. Although the DSP role requires vastly more effort, skill, and dedication than many food industry jobs, many Oregon food service workers are paid as much or more than DSPs.<sup>5</sup> Unless agencies are able to pay competitive wages commensurate with contemporary pay scales and matched to the intensive nature of direct support work, turnover will continue to be very high and adults with I/DD will continue to suffer the consequences.
- 2. Provide key benefits.** Provision of paid time off, health insurance (especially coverage beyond what is included in the Oregon Health Plan), retirement plans, and other benefits can all help with reducing turnover. In particular, we found that employer paid job-related training, financial assistance with pursuing post-secondary education, and support with obtaining credentials were each significantly associated with lower turnover. Agencies need sufficient resources in order to provide these benefits.
- 3. Recognize the value of DSPs.** The work of DSPs is generally considered low status, yet it is crucially important to the health, safety, and well-being of adults with I/DD.<sup>1</sup> Devaluing DSPs by extension reflects a low value placed on the lives of people with I/DD. As a matter of health equity, Oregon must prioritize the well-being of our citizens with I/DD and the professionals who support them.
- 4. Ensure pay equity.** The low value currently placed on DSP work goes hand-in-hand with the demographic characteristics of the DSP workforce. DSPs are primarily women and many of them are people of color—demographic groups that consistently earn lower pay in the United States. As one report stated, DSPs receive gendered pay for gendered work<sup>9</sup> highlighting the inherent inequity in a pay structure that values caregiving roles less than other forms of work. Oregon has an opportunity to take the lead not only in ensuring pay equity within the DSP workforce but also in elevating DSP pay scales to a level that is equitable in the context of pay levels for other types of skilled labor in the state.

In addition to these strategies for immediate action, we offer the following recommendations for enhancing future data availability and analyses to provide more detailed and ongoing information:

- 1. Work with the Human Services Research Institute to develop and pilot test collection of demographic data in the NCI Staff Stability Survey.** In making points about demographic characteristics of the DSP workforce, this report has relied on national data available from other sources. The national Staff Stability Survey could incorporate questions about gender, racial and ethnic, and age characteristics of the DSP workforce within each agency. Agencies already maintain this information for other required reporting so it should be straightforward to report the same aggregated information in the Staff Stability Survey. Oregon could serve as a pilot venue for testing collection of these data before adding demographic questions to the national survey. Inclusion of demographic information would provide a more complete picture of the DSP workforce and associated compensation and turnover issues from an equity perspective.
- 2. Pilot test collection of data on average wages by tenure category.** A limitation in the current national Staff Stability Survey data is that it does not include data on DSP pay ranges within agencies (e.g., based on tenure). The data only provide one average hourly pay figure per agency. Again, Oregon could serve as a test venue for collecting more detailed wage information via the NCI Staff Stability Survey. Separating pay data by tenure would allow a more fine-grained analysis of relationships between size of pay increases and extent of turnover. Such analyses would yield additional recommendations on stepped pay scales to promote retention of experienced and skilled staff.
- 3. Consider a study of the association between staff turnover and abuse of residents with I/DD.** The Oregon Office of Developmental Disabilities Services separately maintains data on the number of allegations and substantiated reports of abuse and neglect for each agency. These data could be analyzed in conjunction with the NCI Staff Stability Survey data on staff turnover to test the hypothesis that greater turnover contributes to more abuse and neglect of adults with I/DD. Findings would contribute substantially to building evidence of the human cost of high turnover in the DSP workforce.
- 4. Consider incorporating data on agency-specific dollar costs of turnover.** Such costs include overtime pay to fill staffing gaps, as well as the expenses of recruiting and training new staff. These data would allow a formal cost-benefit analysis of the financial savings that could be realized by raising wages to reduce turnover.
- 5. Conduct periodic reviews of DSP turnover and pay.** Ongoing analysis is needed to monitor DSP turnover and evaluate changes in turnover following pay increases and other relevant policy changes. Such analyses will inform future efforts to further decrease turnover and maintain a stable DSP workforce in Oregon.



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