

COVID-19 Impact on Direct Support Professionals and Providers of Intellectual Disability/Autism Services

Individuals with intellectual disability or autism (ID/A) are at increased risk of complications due to COVID, while providers of ID/A services had been struggling for years due to underfunding before the pandemic hit. These challenges have led to significant strain on the ID/A workforce, with providers having significant problems with maintaining staff.

In August 2020, the seven associations in Pennsylvania that represent Intellectual Disability/Autism (ID/A) service providersⁱ joined together to collect and analyze data on: 1) the impact of COVID-19 on providers; 2) barriers to Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) being able to work during the pandemic; and 3) the impact on DSP Turnover and Open Position Rates. Other stakeholders participated in the analysis and are listed in the endnote.

METHODS

The analysis methods included surveying the respective memberships and gathering input on provider impact through online surveys, meetings, and conferences. 49 provider organizations responded to the Impact of COVID-19 on Providers survey, 123 provider organizations responded to the DSP Turnover and Open Positions survey, and 306 individuals responded to the Barriers to DSPs survey.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PROVIDERS

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly reduced the capacity of provider organizations to provide services. Transportation Trip services were most impacted by the pandemic with an 80% decrease in the number of individuals served, followed by Community Participation Supports (CPS) (68% decrease) and Supported Employment services (40% decrease).

Service	Number of Individuals Served Before COVID-19	Number of Individuals Served Currently	Decrease in Individuals Served
Transportation Trip	380	75	80%
CPS	5020	1596	68%
Supported Employment, Small Group Employment	1137	679	40%
In-Home Community, Companion	1757	1105	37%

The pandemic also greatly changed the way provider organizations operated their businesses. Fifty-five percent (55%) struggled to deliver services because of lack of opportunities in the community; 33% struggled due to being in a high-transmission area; and 31% struggled due to local school changes. Twelve percent (12%) considered closing a service and one organization permanently closed their CPS services.

September 23, 2020

COVID-19 Impact on Direct Support Professionals and Providers of Intellectual Disability/Autism Services
Page 2 of 4

DSP TURNOVER AND OPEN POSITIONS

The 123 provider organizations that responded to this survey represent 32,112 of the estimated 55,000 DSPs in Pennsylvania. As of July 31, 2020, the open position rate was approximately **18.1%** (compared to 19% as of June 30, 2019). The open position rate of 18.1% remains similar to the previous year despite the 37% to 80% decrease in individuals served across service types during the pandemic. This indicates the current number of open positions remains greater than would be anticipated given the size of the DSP workforce providing services in the previous year.

Turnover between April 1 to July 31, 2020, when annualized, is **55.9%** (compared to 31% in as of June 30, 2019). The current turnover rate has nearly doubled in recent months compared to the previous year despite the 37% to 80% decrease in individuals served across service types during the pandemic. This turnover rate is also substantially greater than would be anticipated given the size of the DSP workforce providing services in the previous year versus the smaller workforce during the pandemic.

BARRIERS TO DSPs

When isolating the responses of DSPs from the other respondents, Heightened Risks of COVID-19 to Self or Members of Household emerged as the top reason at 64.5%, followed by wages (42.1%) and Home Schooling/Educating Children at Home (39.5%).

Responses from DSPs to the DSP Barriers Survey	
64.50%	Heightened COVID19 risks to self or members of household
42.10%	Wages
39.50%	Home Schooling/Educating Children at Home
36.80%	Poor Health/Higher risk
35.50%	Child Care
27.60%	Family Care
17.10%	Family Instability
15.80%	Food Insecurity
14.50%	Health care and insurance
6.60%	Transportation
3.90%	Housing

DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a large decrease in the number of individuals with ID/A that were able to be served. The survey results reflect reduced capacity of Pennsylvania ID/A providers to serve individuals, especially in services that rely on community outings like Transportation, CPS, and

September 23, 2020

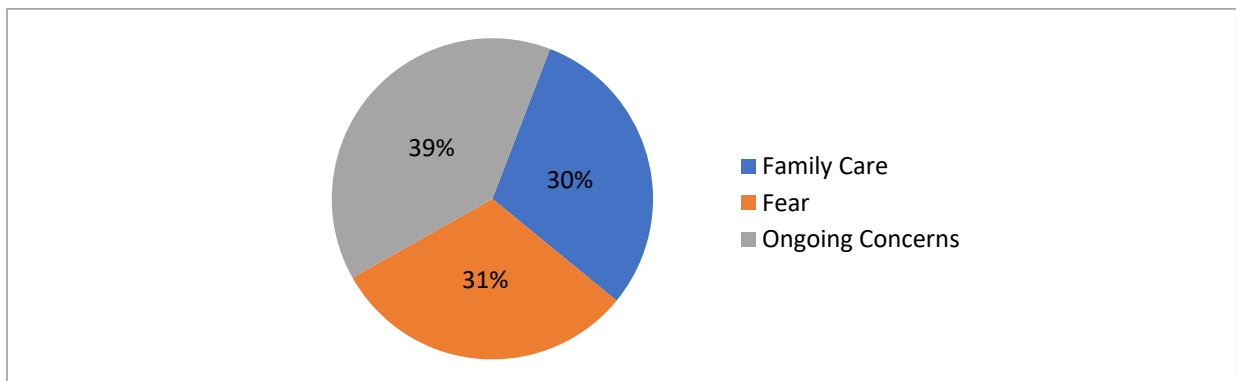
COVID-19 Impact on Direct Support Professionals and Providers of Intellectual Disability/Autism Services
Page 3 of 4

Employment. Likely due to this decrease in capacity, one survey participant indicated that they had already closed a service, and six indicated that they were considering closing a service.

The pandemic also changed the way that services are provided: Roughly half of survey participants noted that they were providing at least some of their services virtually.

The results show a significant jump in turnover compared to the previous year, to 55.9% annualized. Open positions have remained relatively steady, and this may be due to the fact that many providers experienced a decrease in service capacity while DSPs may not have been able to relocate to other DSP positions. Some DSPs worked in day programs that were forced to shut down during the pandemic and those DSPs were unable or unwilling to work in residential programs. For example, some organizations had overnight shifts available that some DSPs were not able to take due to child care, family at home, or other reasons.

There are three main categories in the Barriers to DSPs: A FEAR category (including Heightened Risk of COVID-19 and Poor Health) 30.9%; a FAMILY CARE category (including Educating Children at Home; Child Care; and Family Care); and a PRE-EXISTING CONCERNS category (Wages; Work/Life Balance; Family Instability; Food Insecurity at 30.1%; HealthCare/ Insurance; Transportation; and Housing) at 39%. While this is the largest identified factor, it must be recognized that all of these conditions existed before the pandemic and have been the focus of advocacy for years, testifying to the long-term workforce crisis within the ID/A field.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The Intellectual Disability/Autism system was struggling for years with high workforce turnover and open position rates before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. These issues were exacerbated by the pandemic and underscore the need for both immediate intervention during the COVID-19 crisis and long-term significant change to the infrastructure of the system as whole in order to meet the needs of the population served. Recommendations include:

September 23, 2020

COVID-19 Impact on Direct Support Professionals and Providers of Intellectual Disability/Autism Services
Page 4 of 4

- Increased financial support for DSPs and provider organizations to ensure individuals with ID/A have programs to return to post-pandemic.
- Provide DSPs with access and resources for childcare so they are available to work, adequate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and training so DSPs feel safe and protected while on the job, provide resources to assist them in schooling their children at home in districts without in-person schooling options, and increased wages to compensate and retain DSPs during and after this public health crisis.
- Continued advocacy for flexibility in service delivery and recognition that the needs and interests of individuals with ID/A should be a primary consideration in service design.

ⁱ This data brief was a collaborative project of the following organizations: Alliance of Community Service Providers (Alliance CSP), Moving Agencies toward Excellence (MAX), Pennsylvania Advocates and Resources for Autism and Intellectual Disability (PAR), Rehabilitation and Community Providers Association (RCPA), The Arc of Pennsylvania, The Provider Alliance (TPA), and UCP of PA.

The following organizations assisted with the preparation of this data brief: Disability Rights Pennsylvania; Temple University Institute on Disabilities; and Vision For Equality.