

# What is a Direct Support Professional?



**“One might summarize the job description of the direct support worker as requiring the wisdom of Solomon, the patience of Job, and the caring of Florence Nightingale...”**

- Clarence J. Sundram,  
Advisor to the Governor of NY,  
2012

Services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are predominantly provided by private, community-based providers, who range from small family-operated agencies to multi-state organizations. These providers offer services funded by the government so that individuals with IDD can live full lives in the community instead of institutions. These services are delivered through a dedicated workforce called Direct Support Professionals (DSPs).

A DSP is a worker who assists a person with disabilities to lead a fulfilling life in the community through a diverse range of services like helping him or her get ready in the morning, take medication, go to or find work, and participate in social activities.



## What do they do?

- DSPs form close, trusted relationships with individuals with disabilities and their families, making community living in Colorado a reality.
- DSPs teach personal care skills, money management, and social skills.
- DSPs are proficient in understanding and communicating complex information to others via significant regulatory paperwork, among other means.
- DSPs often perform physically strenuous work, such as lifting and moving individuals to meet their mobility needs and the performance of daily activities.
- DSPs support the human dignity of the people they support and serve as advocates through the promotion of human and civil rights.
- DSPs are professionals who are highly trained in a wide variety of critical areas that include medication administration, first aid, CPR, safe behavioral de-escalation and intervention, safety, and much more. They carry significant responsibilities to comply with regulations and even keep a person alive in medically complex scenarios.

**“They got up this morning, early, and left their families on this holiday Monday, to go out and make this thing called “community living” happen. Their work, done well, doesn’t look like labour. Their work, done well, is, however, work. It’s the kind of labour that changes lives, changes families and changes communities. It’s the kind of labour that requires dedication and self-discipline and determination. It’s the kind of labour, done well, that is exhausting.”**

- Dave Hingsburger,  
Disability Rights Advocate, 2014

## Sounds great! What’s the problem?

With current IDD reimbursement rates, providers struggle to pay enough to recruit and retain a stable, qualified workforce. Compensation doesn’t reflect the amount of responsibility required. This results in a large DSP turnover rate and ripples into wage compression at mid-management levels and above. This turnover affects continuity of care and quality of services, as many in the workforce leave before they have time to gain a

person’s trust when providing support. To stabilize the DSP

workforce and improve continuity of care and outcomes for people with IDD, Colorado must make a significant investment in DSP compensation.



Please contact Emma Hudson, Alliance’s Director of Government & Community Relations, for more information or with questions:  
ehudson@alliancecolorado.org, 608.669.3662