

(REVIEW ARTICLE)



## Perhaps workforce equilibrium has been achieved: We just don't like the outcome

Scott Spreat \*

*Woods Research Institute, Woods System of Care, Langhorne, PA, USA.*

GSC Advanced Research and Reviews, 2023, 15(03), 227–230

Publication history: Received on 05 May 2023; revised on 13 June 2023; accepted on 15 June 2023

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/gscarr.2023.15.3.0239>

### Abstract

The vacancy rate associated with Direct Support Professional positions within the intellectual disability service system was examined. Based on an increasing number of persons receiving residential services and a similarly increasing number of Direct Support Professionals, it was suggested that an equilibrium between supply and demand had been reached. It was acknowledged that this “equilibrium” clearly does not meet the satisfaction of people working in and supported by the field. A possible explanation was offered.

**Keywords:** DSP; Workforce Crisis; Supply; Demand

### 1. Introduction

Agencies that provide supports and services to individuals who have intellectual disability are unable to hire sufficient numbers of adequately trained staff to provide supports and services directly to individuals with intellectual disability. These positions are typically referred to as Direct Support Professionals, although the terms Client Care Worker, Residential Counselor, and Aide are generally interchangeable. Numerous research and advocacy articles have highlighted the “workforce crisis” in the intellectual disability field (National Core Indicator Project, 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2022); even the President’s Committee on People with Intellectual Disabilities (2012) declared the situation to be a crisis over 10 years ago. These staffing shortages negatively impact program quality and incur substantial expenses for both overtime and recruitment/training of replacement staff (Spreat, 2020).

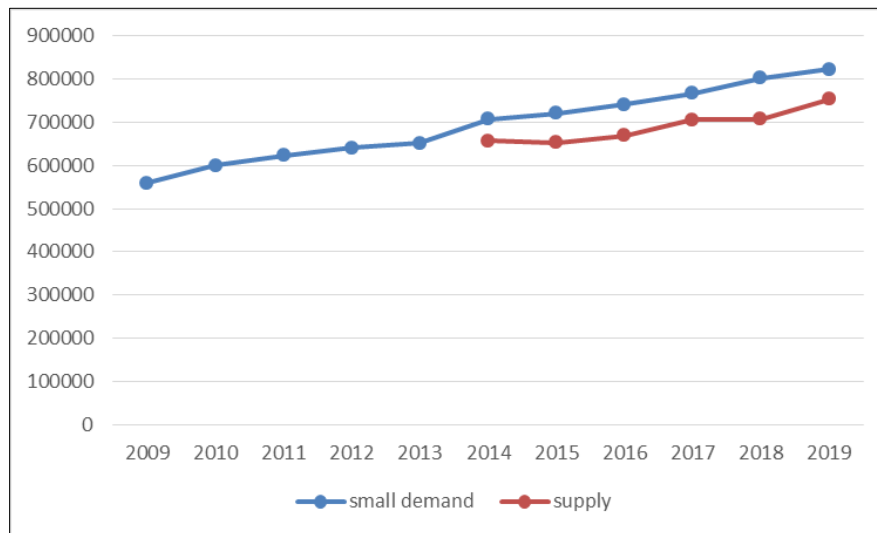
Spreat (2021) has argued that the government’s practice of setting prices to be paid for the provision on intellectual disability supports and services is at the root of the workforce crisis. Historically, fixed prices have resulted in shortages, such as those experienced in the staffing of the intellectual disabilities field. The notion that the position of Direct Support Professional is an unpleasant form of employment was strongly refuted in a recent survey of Direct Support Professionals (Baker, Kruse, Bridges, & Galinda, 2023).

Residential census data reported by the State of the Sates project (State of the States, undated) suggest that the number of persons with intellectual disability receiving residential supports increased just under 2% per year from 2014 through 2019. Applying common residential staffing formulae to these data, Spreat (2022) was able to estimate the number of Direct Support Professionals needed to provide these needed supports to this increasing number of individuals. These estimates were based on assumptions regarding home size and staffing requirements; details on the calculation are available from the author.

The National Core Indicator project conducted annual staffing stability studies during the 2014 through 2019 period. These studies suggested that while slightly more variable than census, the vacancy rate for Direct Support Professionals averaged just over 9% (9.2%). These estimates of Direct Support Vacancy rates were applied to the estimated demand

\* Corresponding author: Scott Spreat

for Direct Support Professionals to create an estimate of actual supply of Direct Support Professionals. The combined supply and demand graph is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Estimated demand and supply of DSPs

Of particular interest is the fact that the two lines on the graph in Figure 1 are essentially parallel. The growth in the supply of Direct Support Professionals, consistently matching the growth in estimated demand, suggests that supply and demand forces are acting in concert. One might argue that the parallel lines suggest a market equilibrium has been maintained over time, although not an equilibrium to the satisfaction of provider agencies, advocates, or people with intellectual disability.

It can be argued that supply and demand are always in equilibrium, and appearances to the contrary may reflect a misunderstanding of the nature of the demand. The core question must be who or what forces determine what constitutes the demand for a product or service. Certainly, provider agencies, advocates, and people with intellectual disability have a vested interest in establishing a high demand for Direct Support Professionals, and this high demand might reasonably be justified by health and safety standards. Provider agencies, advocates, and individuals with intellectual disability, however, are not the purchasers of intellectual disability services. While they are certainly interested parties, they do not determine the demand. While Providers, advocates, and individuals with intellectual disability may suggest that demand for Direct Support Professionals significantly exceeds the supply, it must be recognized that their estimate of "demand" is really a self-imposed (and arguably self-serving) expectation. The determinant of demand, must extend beyond those individuals who have a vested interest in the supply of DSPs. Ultimately demand is determined by the purchaser of a product/service. In the case of intellectual disability services (and all other social support services), demand is determined by societal opinion, as expressed through the budgetary processes of their state legislatures. That the supply of Direct Support Professionals runs consistently with the demand for Direct Support Professionals suggests that from a societal perspective, market forces have driven supply and demand into equilibrium.

Nothing in these data suggest that the provider perception of a staffing shortage is wrong. They instead suggest that the purchaser of intellectual disability supports and services (i.e., society) is generally satisfied with a level of staffing that falls short of what the professionals perceive as a need. This observation does not suggest that providers, advocates, and people with intellectual disability should accept the status quo. Instead, the findings suggest the need for continued and arguably more effective actions. While it is indeed likely that a massive pay increase (Spreat, 2021) would draw more applicants to the open Direct Support Professional positions, there must be sufficient motivation to allocate funding to support those increases. Clearly, one must focus on the behaviors of state legislators who make these allocations.

Let us recognize that legislative behavior is largely reinforced by a combination of altruism, compromise, and of course, financial support. To date the intellectual disability field has relied largely on appeals to altruism. We highlight the contributions of Direct Support Professionals and describe their fiscal plight, in the hope that these efforts will result in increased allocations. Success with this approach has been evident, but frankly, too limited to have any sort of impact on the workforce crisis. More significant wage increases will be needed if they are to impact the vacancy rates. Direct

Support Professionals make a little bit more money, but the field still faces significant vacancies. It is now time for the industry to consider those legal ways to recognize legislative behavior that is supportive of the industry using financial reinforcers and incentives. There are legal ways to attempt to shape legislative behavior, and these typically involve the use of Political Action Committees (PACs) to support campaigns. Some members of the intellectual disability field has been reticent to participate in such legal activities, perhaps out of naïve collective senses of altruism. This reluctance must end. It should be an expectation that every senior manager within the intellectual disability system make a substantial donation to the PACs supporting both powerful and supportive legislators.

It is recognized that the average CEO working in a social service agency that offers supports and services to people with intellectual disability is relatively well paid (albeit considerably less than their healthcare counterparts with similar sized agencies). If each of the Pennsylvania CEOs of agencies providing supports and services to people with intellectual disability were to donate 2% of their annual salary to a PAC, a substantial sum would be available to support legislators who are supportive of people with intellectual disability. If 2% is a reasonable donation for CEOs, perhaps 1 % donation might be equally reasonable for all other senior staff working in intellectual disability. A meaningful difference could be achieved. As a group, providers need to overcome their squeamishness regarding PACs and understand that the practice is both legal and necessary. The author encourages all readers to confirm the legality of PAC contributions with their attorneys.

---

## 2. Conclusion

It is suggested that from a societal perspective, the supply of Direct Support Professionals is in equilibrium with the demand for such individuals. This is evidenced by the parallel growth of both supply and demand. While equilibrium is suggested, it is recognized that professionals and stakeholders will recognize a shortage of Direct Support Professionals. It is suggested that advocacy efforts focus on making this issue one of importance for legislators.

---

## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Acknowledgments*

Acknowledgments Thanks to Michael McGrane for suggesting that there is an argument that supply and demand are always in balance.

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

The author is employed by an agency that provides supports and services to people with intellectual disability. This agency employs Direct Support Professionals.

---

## References

- [1] Baker, J., Kruse, L, Bridges, A., & Galinda, N. (2023). 2023 DSP Survey Report. Alexandria, VA: Relias/ANCOR.
- [2] National Core Indicators. (2022). National Core Indicators Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities 2020 Staff Stability Survey Report. <https://www.nationalcoreindicators.org/resources/staff-stability-survey/>
- [3] National Core Indicators. (2020). National Core Indicators 2019 Staff Stability Survey Report. <https://www.nationalcoreindicators.org/resources/staffstability-survey/>
- [4] National Core Indicators. (2019). National Core Indicators 2018 Staff Stability Survey Report. Retrieved from the National Core Indicators website: <https://www.nationalcoreindicators.org/resources/staffstability-survey/>
- [5] National Core Indicators. (2019). National Core Indicators 2017 Staff Stability Survey Report. Retrieved from the National Core Indicators website: <https://www.nationalcoreindicators.org/resources/staffstability-survey/>
- [6] National Core Indicators. (2018). National Core Indicators 2016 Staff Stability Survey Report. Retrieved from the National Core Indicators website: <https://www.nationalcoreindicators.org/resources/staffstability-survey/>
- [7] National Core Indicators. (2017). National Core Indicators 2015 Staff Stability Survey Report. Retrieved from the National Core Indicators website: <https://www.nationalcoreindicators.org/resources/staffstability-survey/>
- [8] National Core Indicators. (2016). National Core Indicators 2014 Staff Stability Survey Report. Retrieved from the National Core Indicators website: <https://www.nationalcoreindicators.org/resources/staffstability-survey/>.

- [9] President's Committee on People with Intellectual Disabilities. (2012). *Managed Long Term Services and Supports: 2012 Report to the President*. Washington DC: President's Committee on People with Intellectual Disabilities
- [10] Spreat, S. (2020). *Crises in Intellectual Disability*. London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- [11] Spreat, S. (2021). Government Price Controls Maintain the Intellectual Disability Workforce Crisis. *International Journal of Economics, Business and Management*, 5(3), 389-393.
- [12] State of the States in Intellectual Disabilities. (undated). University of Kansas. [Hyyps://stateofthestates.org/state-profiles/](https://stateofthestates.org/state-profiles/). Accessed 5/11/23.