

2023 REPORT

# Stability of the Direct Support Professional Workforce Providing Residential Supports to Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in Oregon in 2021



## Executive Summary

High turnover rates among Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) that provide care to Oregon adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) impact the quality of care and contribute to high service costs. This report is the third in a series that uses data from the National Core Indicators State of the Workforce Surveys (formerly named the Staff Stability Surveys) to examine trends in wages and turnover among DSPs employed by Oregon agencies that provide 24-hour residential services to adults with I/DD living in group homes, and to assess factors that are associated with higher turnover rates. Survey data from 2018–2021 was used in this report.

In 2021, 204 out of 212 eligible I/DD residential service provider agencies in Oregon participated in the NCI State of the Workforce Survey. These agencies employed a total of 8,369 DSPs, who were primarily full-time employees. Average wages for DSPs providing residential care varies widely between agencies. In 2021, temporary COVID rate enhancements helped to increase wages, and average hourly wages ranged from \$10.75 to \$21.60 per hour. Overall, wages for DSPs were still considerably lower than those for the Oregon workforce as a whole. As in previous years, the median DSP wage was not sufficient to be considered a living wage for one adult in Oregon in 2021. In addition, DSPs often do not receive adequate or affordable workplace benefits.

Average turnover rates for DSPs decreased in 2021 compared to recent years (38% in 2021, compared to 49% in 2020), however the average proportion of positions that were vacant increased (20% in 2021, compared to 11% in 2020). This indicates ongoing challenges in hiring and maintaining this critical workforce and preventing gaps in care for adults with I/DD. As in previous years, the highest turnover was among those with a job tenure of less than 6 months and turnover decreased as staff tenure increased. While in previous

reports we documented a relationship between higher average pay and lower turnover, in 2021 we found that agencies with higher average starting wages had lower rates of staff turnover.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated an already challenging situation and many of these effects were still evident in 2021. During this time, a constellation of pandemic-related changes in operations and health and safety protocols were implemented. Some, such as changes in modes of service delivery were implemented on an agency-by-agency basis. Others, such as vaccine requirements for staff, were statewide mandates. To examine gaps and strengths in emergency response and gain a better understanding of how DSPs have experienced and been impacted by the pandemic, Oregon opted to continue the COVID-19 survey supplement first included in 2020. While most operational changes were not associated with DSP staffing, we found that agencies that offered pandemic-related bonuses had higher turnover rates than agencies that did not. This finding further highlights how low wages for DSPs contribute to staffing instability, as qualified DSPs may have a financial incentive to transition between agencies.

Based on the findings of our analyses, we conclude that increasing wages is an important tool for reducing DSP turnover and vacancy rates. We further conclude that permanent pay increases are a more reliable mechanism for maintaining a stable DSP workforce than one-time bonuses. Additionally, we recommend the following strategies to help further reduce turnover:

- Provide key benefits and career growth opportunities for DSPs.
- Build on ongoing efforts to recognize the value of DSPs and the importance of their work.
- Ensure pay equity within the DSP workforce and with other types of skilled labor in the state.



## 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. Successfully providing these supports requires DSPs to be interdisciplinary professionals and bring a wide range of skills and knowledge to their job.<sup>1</sup> However, DSP positions are challenging and often come with low pay, limited benefits, and little social status or recognition of the importance of the DSP role.<sup>2</sup> High turnover and large numbers of vacant positions are common, costly, and dangerous.

High turnover and vacancies impact the continuity and quality of care available to adults with I/DD and increase burdens on remaining staff.<sup>2</sup> These issues may amplify risk for medication errors, injuries, and abuse and neglect of adults with I/DD.<sup>3</sup> High turnover also 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>2</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>2</sup> As such, DSP turnover and vacancies are centrally important issues to understand and address.

This is the third report on Oregon DSP staffing stability. Since the first report, which used data from 2018, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated an already challenging situation and highlighted the important role that DSPs play in our society. In addition to making staffing more difficult, the pandemic increased the stress, expectations, and risk for both DSPs and the adults with whom they work.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this updated report is to examine DSP turnover in Oregon during the second year of the pandemic, analyze factors associated with high versus low turnover (including those related to the COVID-19 pandemic), and propose strategies to reduce turnover. This report builds on the prior two versions by exploring four-year trends in DSP wages, turnover, and staffing. It also contains an expanded exploration of DSP eligibility for benefits such as retirement plans and health insurance and, like the second report, contains supplemental data on COVID-19 policies and agency changes. Contextual information was gathered from other sources for the compilation of this document (see references).

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## Data Source

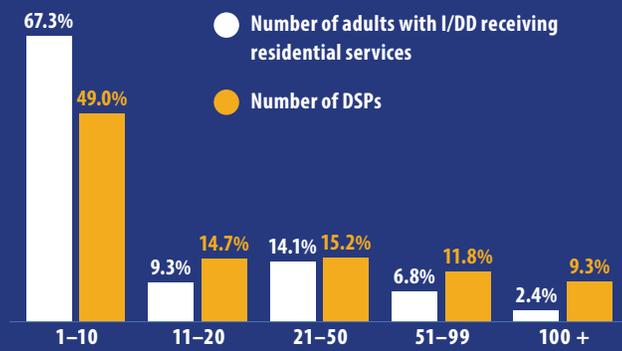
This report primarily uses data from the 2021 National Core Indicators State of the Workforce Survey. While the data in this report reflect the time period of January to December 2021, data collection occurred from March to July of 2022. National Core Indicators (NCI) is a collaboration between the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services, the Human Services Research Institute, and participating state developmental disability agencies. The NCI State of the Workforce Survey collects data on the 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>5</sup> For the 2021 data year, 29 states plus the District of Columbia participated in the 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. Data from the 2018–2020 NCI State of the Workforce Surveys (formerly named Staff Stability Surveys) are included in this report for trend analysis. Group homes are eligible for inclusion in the NCI State of the Workforce Survey if they have been in operation for six continuous months (with hired DSPs) prior to July 1 of the survey year. Explanations of the statistical terms used throughout this report can be found in the Appendix.

# 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, who have a wide range of needs. DSP tasks can vary extensively and often include assisting with personal care, assisting in the development of independent living skills, dispensing medications, monitoring individual behaviors and safety, setting up appointments, and transporting individuals to locations outside the home.

**FIGURE 1**  
Size of Oregon Agencies Providing Residential Services to Adults with I/DD, 2021



## Size of the Oregon DSP Workforce

The DSP workforce in Oregon is growing: in 2020, 159 group homes in Oregon were eligible to participate in the NCI State of the Workforce Survey, and 212 were eligible in 2021. The agencies providing residential services to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) in Oregon range from those serving 1–10 adults with I/DD to those serving 100–499 adults. Most agencies that responded to the 2021 NCI State of the Workforce in Oregon are small, with over 60% serving 10 or fewer adults with I/DD. Only five Oregon agencies provide residential services to more than 100 adults (per agency) with I/DD (Figure 1).

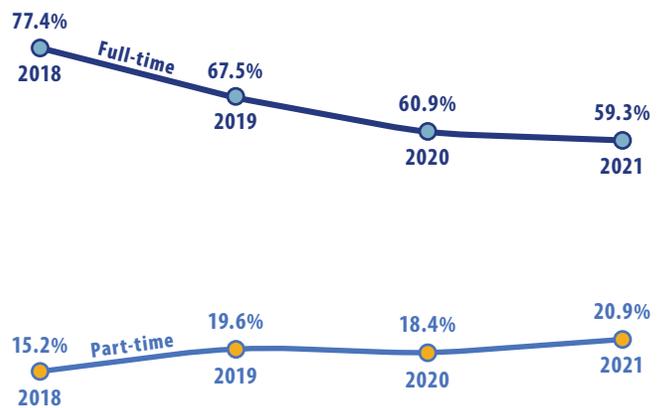
For the purpose of this report, we defined a small agency as one that employed 1–10 DSPs (n=100), a medium agency as one that employed 11–50 DSPs (n=61), and a large agency as one that employed over 50 DSPs (n=43).

In 2021, 204 out of 212 (96%) eligible I/DD residential service provider agencies in Oregon participated in the NCI State of the Workforce Survey. These agencies employed a total of 8,369 DSPs. The number of DSPs per agency ranged from 1 to 728; the majority of agencies employ fewer than 20 DSPs (Figure 1). This does not include information about DSPs that are hired as independent contractors, who are not included in the survey data.

## Full vs. Part-time

Of the DSPs at agencies in the 2021 survey, 21% were part-time workers and 59% were full-time; the remaining 20% worked at agencies that did not distinguish between full-time and part-time DSP positions. While the majority of DSPs are full-time, between 2018 and 2021 there was a steady increase in the proportion of part-time DSPs and a decrease in the proportion of full-time DSPs among eligible agencies that responded to the survey (Figure 2). The proportion of part-time DSPs is higher at large (23.7%) and small (17.5%) agencies compared to medium sized agencies (9.9%).

**FIGURE 2**  
Trends in Part-time and Full-time Employment Among Oregon DSPs, 2018–2021



## Supervisory Support

Frontline supervisors are the first line of management in human service organizations. These are staff who supervise DSPs working with adults with I/DD and often also engage in direct support as part of their duties. Other responsibilities include overseeing implementation of Individual Support Plans (ISPs) and ensuring safety and medical protocols are followed. ISPs are the annual support service plan each individual with I/DD must have in order to receive funded services. Supervisors provide training to DSPs on services and supports identified in the ISP and are also responsible for coordination of care for those they support. DSP stability is often directly impacted by the quality of oversight, training, and supervision they receive from a frontline supervisor.

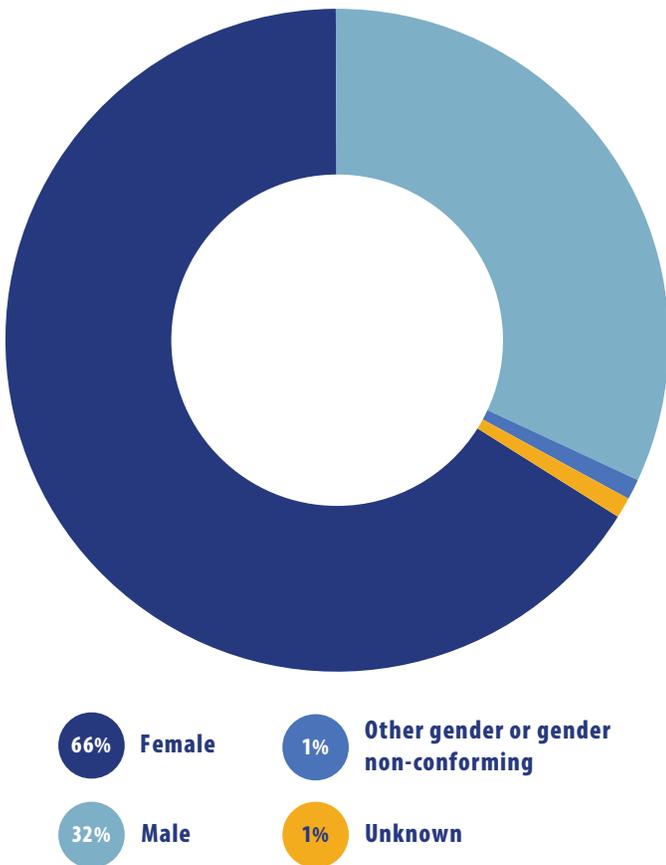
While the total number of supervisors increases with agency size, one key metric is the ratio of DSPs to frontline supervisors. In 2021, the mean ratio was 4 DSPs to 1 supervisor at small agencies, 7 to 1 at medium sized agencies, and 11 to 1 at large agencies.

## DSP Workforce Description

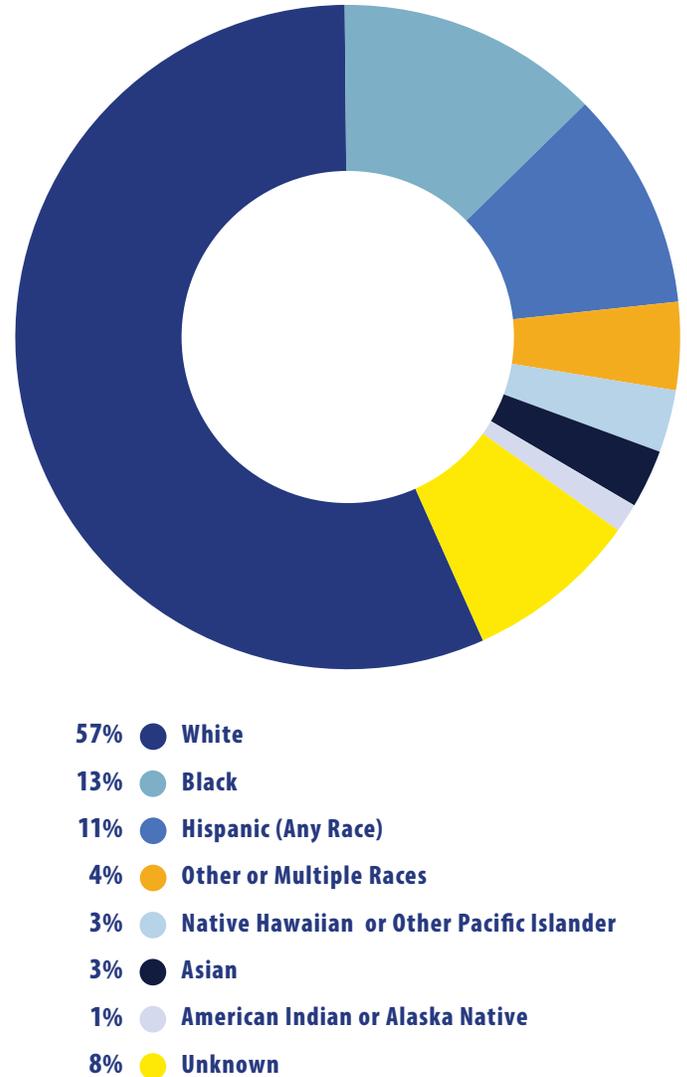
### Demographic Characteristics of the DSP Workforce

Demographic information collected in the NCI State of the Workforce Survey is limited to gender and race and ethnicity.

**FIGURE 3**  
Gender of Oregon DSP Workforce, 2021



**FIGURE 4**  
Race and Ethnicity of Oregon DSP Workforce, 2021



### Gender

Of the 204 eligible agencies participating in the survey, 178 agencies that employed a total of 7,065 staff reported on DSP gender. Among those agencies 66% of DSPs identified as female, 32% as male, 1% as other gender or gender non-conforming, and the gender identity of the remaining 1% was unknown (Figure 3).

### Race and Ethnicity

Data on DSP race and ethnicity were reported by 165 agencies that employed a total of 6,739 DSPs. Among those agencies, 57% of DSPs were White, 13% were Black, 11% were Hispanic, 11% were any other or multiple races, and race and ethnicity of the remaining 8% was unknown (Figure 4).

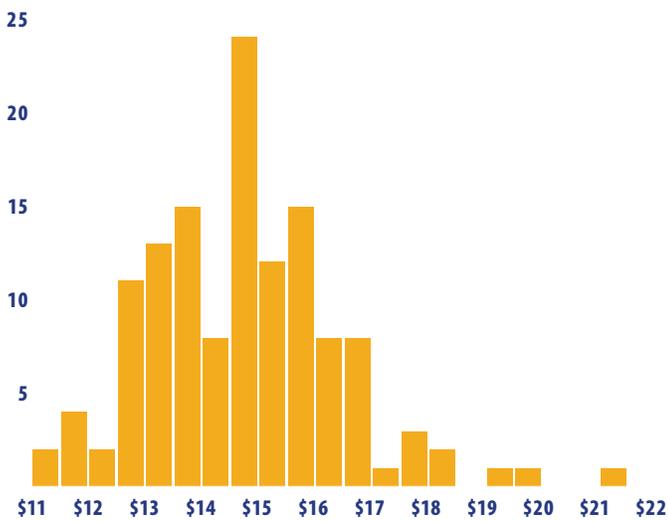
# DSP Wages and Benefits

## Wages

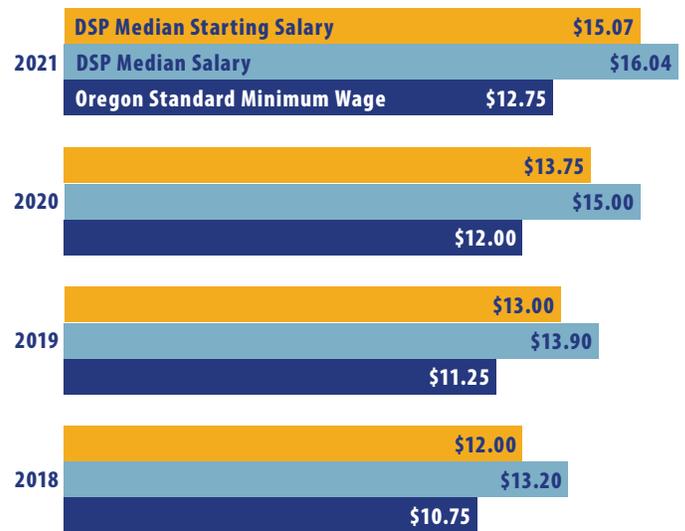
In 2021, the median reported starting pay for residential DSPs in Oregon was \$15.07 per hour and ranged from \$10.75 to \$20.08. Median starting pay did not differ by agency size. Average wages across all tenure groups were only slightly higher than starting wages. Average wages at different agencies ranged from \$10.75 to

\$21.60 per hour (Figure 5). The state-wide median pay was \$16.40 per hour. Average pay was higher at large agencies ( $p=0.05$ ), where the median pay was \$17.08 per hour, compared to \$16.29 at small agencies and \$16.05 at medium sized agencies.

**FIGURE 5**  
Average Hourly Wages for Oregon DSPs Providing Residential Care, 2021



**FIGURE 6**  
Median DSP Wages and Oregon Minimum Wages by Year



## Average Wages

Only 162 (79%) of eligible agencies that responded to the survey provided information about starting pay for DSPs providing residential care, and 157 (76%) provided information about average pay. Agencies that did not provide information about wages were more likely to be small (employing 1–10 DSPs).

## Median Wages

While the median DSP wage in Oregon was above the minimum wage for all regions of Oregon in 2021, it was not sufficient to be considered a living wage for one adult in Oregon in 2021.<sup>7</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>7</sup> The lower end of the DSP wage range (\$10.75) was lower than Oregon’s standard hourly minimum wage of \$12.75 per hour for the July 1, 2020 through June 30, 2021 fiscal year.<sup>8</sup> At these wages, a DSP working full-time was making less than 130% of the Federal Poverty Level for a household of two.<sup>9</sup> Thus, many full-time DSPs met income eligibility criteria for coverage under the Oregon Health Plan.

# DSP Wages and Benefits

## Benefits

The NCI State of the Workforce Survey asked agencies whether or not they provided a range of benefits that may increase retention or attract DSPs to their agency. We found that in addition to low wages, many DSPs do not receive adequate or affordable workplace benefits.

### Paid Time Off

Overall, 138 (67%) of reporting agencies offered some type of paid time off (PTO). Of these agencies, 61 offered both paid vacation time and paid sick time. Many agencies (55) offered pooled PTO, which is PTO that is not distinguished by category (vacation, sick, or other time off). Among the agencies that offered any type of paid leave, only 33 (23%) offered PTO to all DSPs, with no eligibility criteria. The other 77% of agencies had one or more of the following requirements in place: 40 (28%) required that DSPs be full-time, 22 (15%) required that DSPs must work a minimum amount of time within a defined time period, and 63 (44%) required that DSPs must have been employed at the agency for a certain length of time.

Larger agencies were more likely to offer PTO. In 2021, 100% of the 43 agencies that employed 50 or more DSPs and 53 (87%) medium sized agencies offered some type of PTO. In contrast, only 47 (47%) small agencies offered any type of PTO. Between 2018 and 2021, the proportion of agencies who offered any PTO declined. This is in large part due to an increase in the number of smaller agencies that have opened in the state.

### Insurance

Overall, 86 (42%) of reporting agencies offered health insurance coverage, 82 (40%) offered dental insurance, and 72 (35%) offered vision insurance. Among the agencies that offered health insurance coverage, only 5 (6%) offered insurance to all DSPs, with no eligibility criteria. The other 95% of agencies had one or more of the following requirements in place: 56 (65%) required that DSPs be full-time, 35 (41%) required that DSPs must work a minimum amount of time within a defined time period, and 46 (53%) required that DSPs must have been employed at the agency for a certain length of time. Even when benefits are provided and DSPs are eligible, associated out-of-pocket costs may impact their decision to enroll in agency health care plans. Only 69% of eligible DSPs were enrolled in the health insurance benefit when it was offered by their agency.

Oregon requires that employers with 50 or more employees offer health insurance.<sup>10</sup> In 2021, 100% of the 43 agencies that employed 50 or more DSPs offered health and dental insurance and 40 (93%) offered vision insurance. Of the 161 agencies that employed fewer than 50 DSPs\*, 43 (26%) offered health insurance, 39 (24%) offered dental insurance, and 31 (19%) offered vision insurance. Between

2018 and 2021, the proportion of agencies offering health, dental, and vision coverage all declined. This is in large part due to an increase in the number of smaller agencies that have opened in the state.

\*Some organizations with fewer than 50 DSPs may have more than 50 overall employees, but this survey does not collect information on all residential home positions.

### Retirement Plans

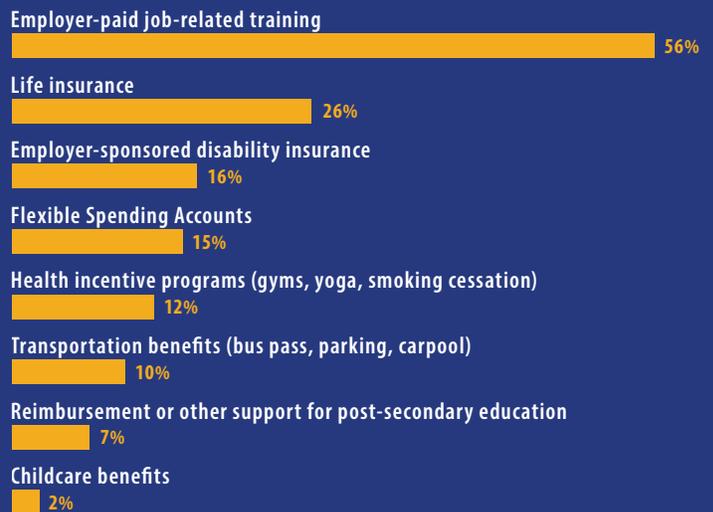
Overall, 87 (43%) of reporting agencies offered an employer-sponsored retirement plan (401k, 403b, or other plan) to some or all DSPs. Eligibility criteria varied between agencies and only 31 (36%) offered retirement plan to all DSPs with no eligibility criteria. The other 64% had one of the following requirements in place: 20 (23%) required that DSPs be full-time, 17 (20%) required that DSPs must work a minimum amount of time within a defined time period, and 42 (48%) required that DSPs must have been employed at the agency for a certain length of time. In 2021, 37 (86%) of large agencies that employed 50 or more DSPs offered a retirement plan to some or all DSPs, compared to only 50 (31%) of agencies that employed fewer than 50 DSPs.

### Other Benefits

There was a lot of variability in what additional benefits were provided by agencies in 2021. Additional benefits ranged from reimbursement or other support for post-secondary education, provided by only 14 (7%) agencies, to employer-paid job-related training, provided by 114 (56%) agencies (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7

#### Proportion of Agencies that Provided Other Benefits to DSPs, 2021



Compared to small and medium sized agencies that employ fewer than 50 DSPs, large agencies were more likely to provide life insurance, employer-sponsored disability insurance, flexible spending accounts, health incentive programs, and reimbursement or other support for post-secondary education.

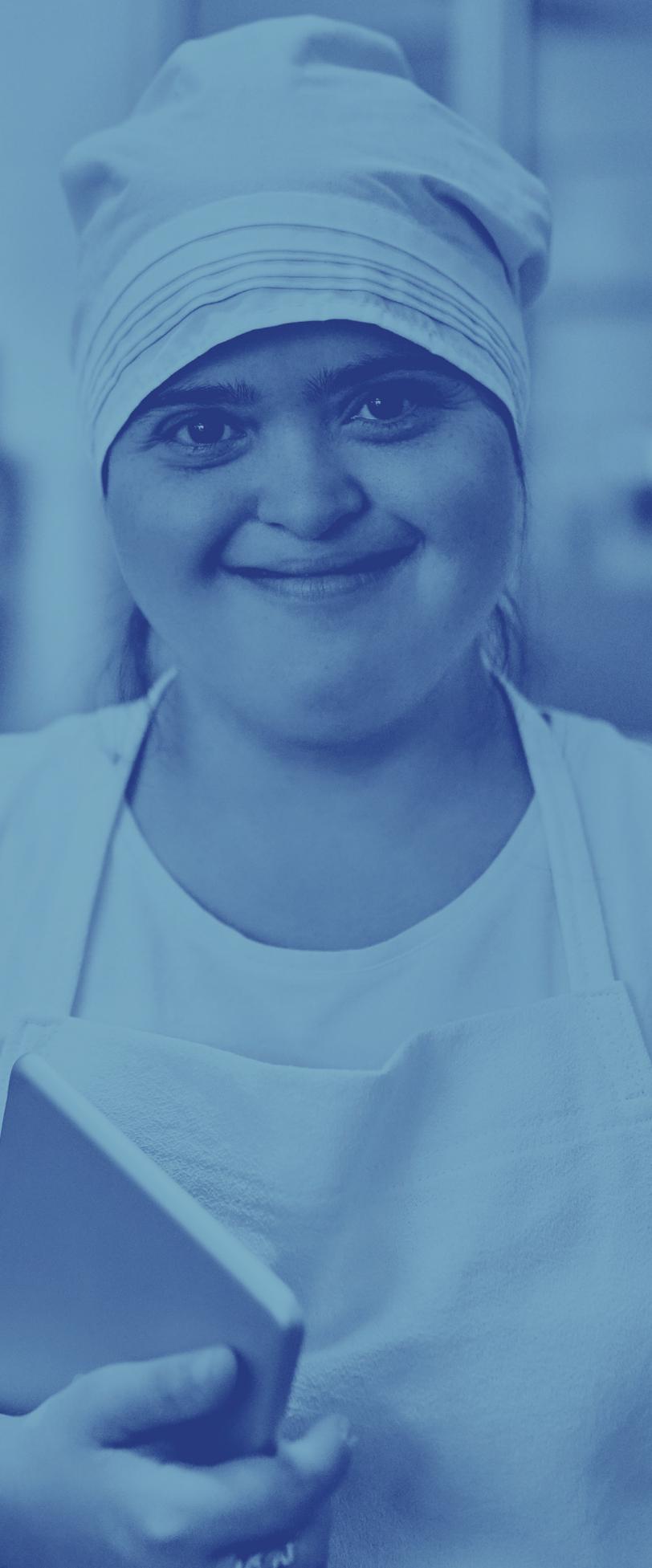
## DSP Wages and Benefits

### Staff Recruitment and Retention Strategies

Beyond wages and benefits, agencies utilize an array of additional strategies to recruit and retain DSPs. In the 2021 NCI State of the Workforce Survey, agencies were asked if they utilized the following 10 staff retention strategies:

- Incentive or referral bonus for current DSPs to bring in new staff (56% said yes)
- Realistic job preview (82%)
- Code of ethics training (84%)
- DSP career ladder to retain highly skilled workers (45%)
- Support to acquire credentials through a state or nationally recognized professional organization (28%)
- Bonuses, stipends, or raises provided at key stages or completion of credentialing process (37%)
- Employee engagement surveys or other efforts aimed at assessing DSP satisfaction and experience working for the agency (33%)
- Employee recognition programs (52%)
- Include DSPs in agency governance (e.g., serving on advisory boards) (19%)
- Require trainings above and beyond those required by State of Oregon regulations (45%)

Only 5 agencies did not employ any of these strategies, and 2 agencies utilized all 10 strategies. The median number of retention strategies per agency was 3. Among the 114 agencies that offered a pay incentive or referral bonus for current DSP staff to bring in new recruits, 79 (69%) offered an amount in excess of \$200, 32 (28%) offered less than \$200, and the remaining 3 respondents were unsure of the incentive amount offered.

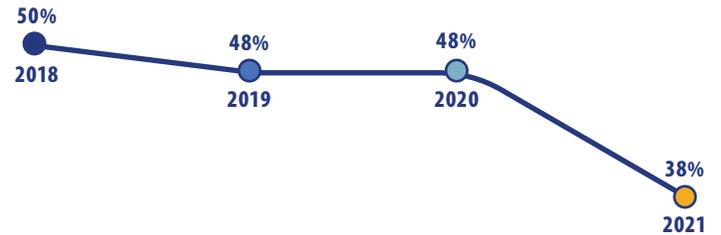


## DSP Turnover, Tenure, and Vacancy Rates



The median turnover rate among DSPs in residential facilities in Oregon in 2021 was 38% and the mean turnover rate was 49%. Compared to previous years, the median turnover rate decreased in 2021 ( $P=0.05$ ; Figure 9).

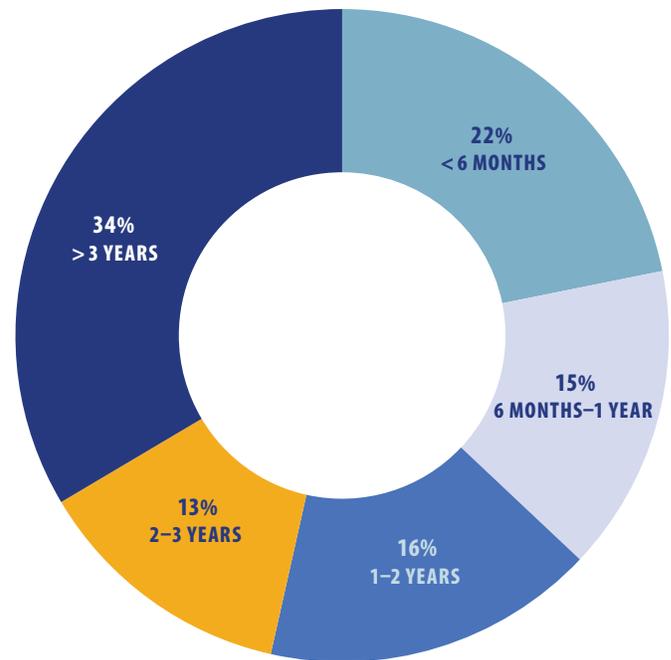
**FIGURE 9**  
Overall DSP Turnover Rate by Year, 2018–2021



### 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 2021, 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. One third had less than one year of experience (Figure 10). As noted earlier, many new agencies were eligible to participate in the State of the Workforce survey in 2021, and DSPs at these agencies would not have had opportunity to gain much tenure yet. However, there have been no significant changes in the distribution of DSP tenure during 2018–2021; thus the addition of new agencies does not fully explain the overall lack of long-term tenure.

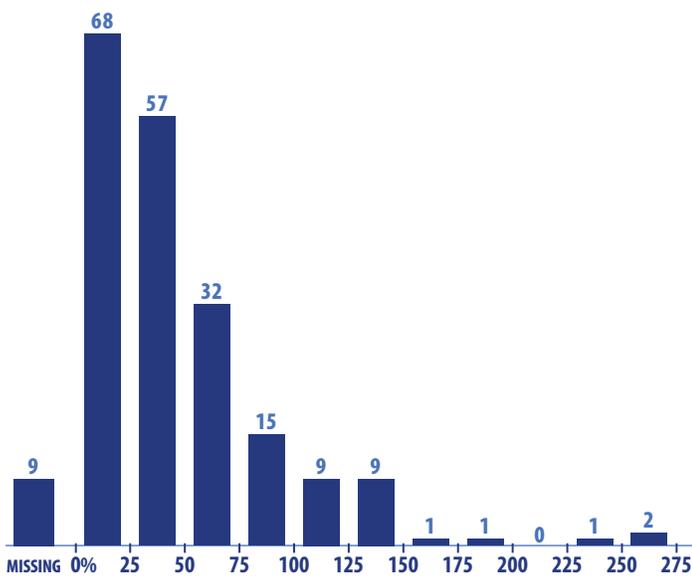
**FIGURE 10**  
Tenure of Current DSPs, 2021



### Overall Turnover Rate

Turnover rate is a metric of stability that captures the proportion of employees who left an agency during the past year. The overall turnover rate was calculated by dividing the total number of DSPs supporting adults with I/DD on each agency’s payroll as of December 31, 2021 by the number of DSPs who had departed the agency between January 1, 2021 and December 31, 2021.<sup>5</sup> In 2021, 195 (96%) of the eligible agencies that participated in the survey provided information about DSP turnover. Turnover varied widely by agency, ranging from 0% to 254%, although all but 23 agencies had turnover rates below 100% (Figure 8). Agency size was not significantly associated with turnover rates.

**FIGURE 8**  
Ranges of DSP Turnover Rates, 2021



# DSP Turnover, Tenure, and Vacancy Rates

## Turnover Rate by Staff Tenure

Traditionally, DSP turnover rates decrease the longer a DSP is employed with an agency. 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 and median turnover rates were both 50% or higher in all tenure groups except those who had been employed as DSPs for longer than 3 years (Table 1). Similar patterns were observed during 2018–2020.

**TABLE 1**  
Turnover by Duration of DSP Tenure Category, 2021

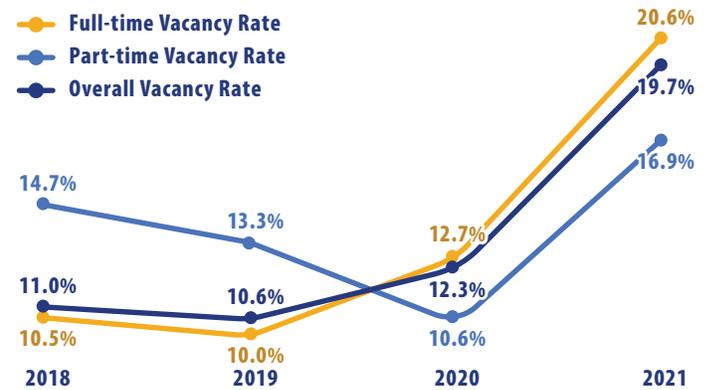
Tenure Category	Range in Turnover Rates	Median Turnover Rate	Mean Turnover Rate
Overall	0–254%	38%	49%
< 6 months	0–700%	100%	139%
6 months–1 year	0–600%	60%	94%
1–2 years	0–900%	67%	90%
2–3 years	0–300%	65%	50%
> 3 years	0–123%	24%	30%

## Vacancies

Vacancy rates, or the percentage of DSP positions that are vacant, are another metric that can be used to assess stability of the DSP workforce in Oregon. As of December 2021, there were 1,290 vacant full-time DSP positions and 356 vacant part-time DSP positions in Oregon for those agencies that responded to the survey.

Overall, 19.7% of DSP positions were vacant statewide, including 20.6% of full-time DSP positions and 16.9% of part-time DSP positions. This is a significant increase compared to prior years ( $P < 0.001$ ); in 2020 12.7% of full-time and 10.6% of part-time positions were vacant (Figure 11). The number of vacancies at each agency ranged from 1–131, and the majority of both full and part-time vacancies were at large agencies.

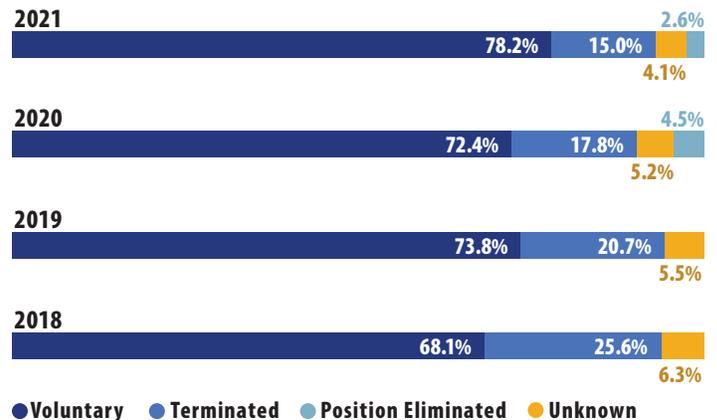
**FIGURE 11**  
Proportion of DSP Positions that were Vacant, 2018–2021



## Reasons for Departure

In 2021, 5,178 DSPs departed their jobs. The majority (78%) of DSPs who departed their jobs left voluntarily, while 15% were terminated and 3% had their positions eliminated (Figure 12). The reason for departure was unknown for the remaining 4% of separated DSPs. Over time, the proportion of DSPs who left their job voluntarily has increased, while the proportion who were terminated has decreased.

**FIGURE 12**  
Reasons for DSP Departure, 2018–2021



The NCI State of the Workforce 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. A national study conducted during 2021 found that the majority of DSPs who left their positions did so for reasons related to COVID-19, including testing positive or needing to quarantine, fear of becoming infected or infecting others, or due to lack of childcare or the need to care for a family member.<sup>3</sup> In the following sections, we examine associations between compensation, benefits, and pandemic related changes and turnover and vacancy rates.

## Exploring Turnover and Vacancy Rates

### Agency Size and Supervisory Support

Agency size is the largest predictor of turnover rates, and turnover rates are significantly higher at larger agencies ( $p < 0.001$ ).

The average turnover rate was 32% (range 0–180%) at small agencies, 59% (range 6–252%) at medium agencies, and 72% (range 7–254%) at large agencies.

Vacancy rates did not vary by agency size ( $p=0.65$ ). After adjusting for agency size, the ratio of supervisors to DSPs was not associated with either turnover rate or vacancy rate.

## Association of Wages with Turnover and Vacancies

### Average Wages

In 2021, we did not find a significant negative correlation between average hourly wages of DSPs working in residential settings and overall turnover rate ( $r=0.004$ ;  $p=0.47$ ).

This finding is in contrast to prior years, where we observed a strong negative correlation between average hourly wages and staff turnover (Table 2). There was also no association between average hourly wages and overall vacancy rates.

**TABLE 2**  
Correlation between average hourly wages and staff turnover by year

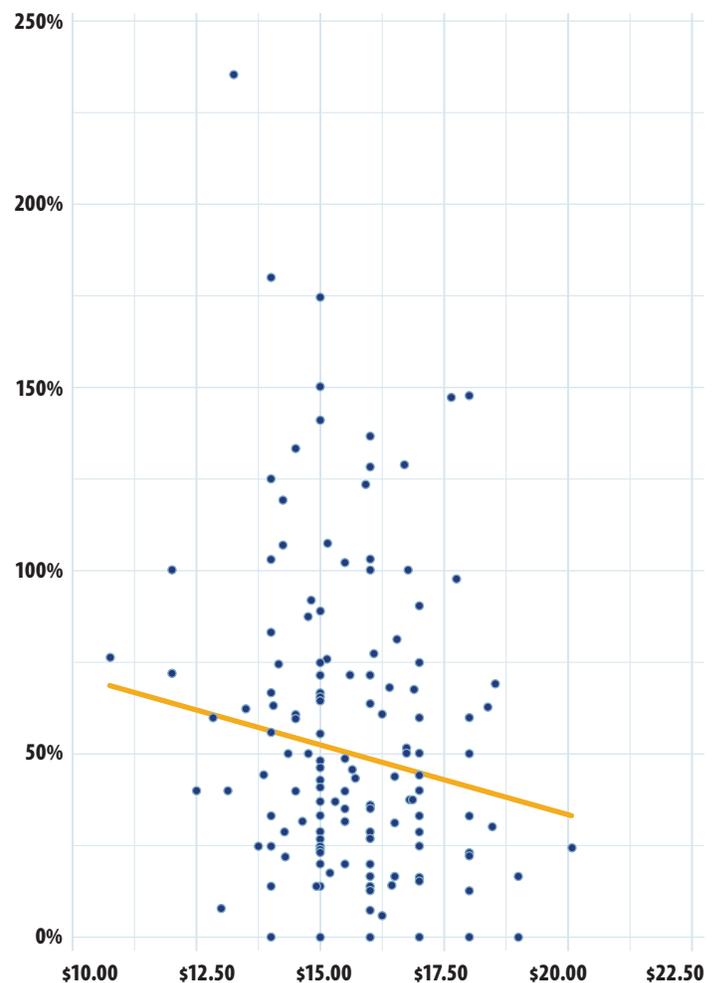
Year	Correlation Coefficient (R)	P-Value
2021	0.004	0.47
2020	-0.25	0.01*
2019	-0.18	0.06*
2018	-0.21	0.02*

\* In 2018, 2019, and 2020, lower average hourly wages were associated with a higher average turnover rate.

## Starting Wages

In 2021, average starting wages appear to be correlated with overall turnover rate ( $r=-0.04$ ;  $p=0.07$ ). As hourly starting wages increased, turnover decreased (Figure 13). As in prior years, we did not find a significant association between starting wages and the percentage of positions that were vacant.

**FIGURE 13**  
Correlation between average starting wages and turnover





### Association of Benefits and Retention Strategies with Turnover and Vacancies

#### Benefits

Large agencies were more likely than small and medium sized agencies to offer benefits to DSPs. For that reason, all analyses of the association between benefits and turnover and vacancy rates are adjusted for agency size. After adjustment for agency size, we did not find any association between individual benefits and either turnover or vacancy rates.

However, there was some indication among agencies that did offer benefits, that additional eligibility criteria may be associated with increased turnover or vacancy rates. Agencies that required DSPs to be full-time in order to be eligible for health insurance had turnover rates that were significantly higher than those with other or no requirements (68.0% vs. 46.0% turnover;  $p=0.02$ ). Similarly, agencies that required DSPs to work full-time in order to be eligible for PTO had vacancy rates that were significantly higher than those with other or no requirements for PTO (23.6% vs. 17.1% vacancy;  $p=0.03$ ).

#### Retention Strategies

As with benefits, large agencies were more likely to implement retention strategies, so all analyses between retention strategies and turnover and vacancy rates are adjusted for agency size. We found that, while most retention strategies were not associated with either DSP turnover or vacancy rates in 2021, agencies with higher vacancy rates were more likely to have implemented certain recruitment and retention strategies.

Agencies with a DSP career ladder to retain highly skilled workers had a vacancy rate of 22.6%, compared to 17.3% of agencies with no career ladder ( $p=0.03$ ). Similarly, agencies that provided bonuses, stipends, or raises to DSPs as they completed key stages of a credentialing process or upon completion of the credentialing process had a vacancy rate of 21.5%, compared to 17.2% at agencies that did not offer such incentives ( $p=0.06$ ). Finally, agencies that required trainings above and beyond those required by State of Oregon Administrative Rules had a vacancy rate of 22.6%, compared to 15.5% at agencies that did not require additional trainings ( $p=0.02$ ). However, we did not find associations between retention strategies and turnover rates. Agencies where additional training is required and that emphasize building and retaining a highly skilled workforce may do so because of the significant support needs of the residents they serve. The intensity and complexity of the work in these agencies may make their positions harder to fill, contributing to higher vacancy rates.

### Background

The pandemic prompted many businesses and schools to transition to a remote workforce, following recommended safety protocols. However, for DSPs who provide residential services to adults with I/DD living in group homes, remote work was not an option. Instead, a constellation of pandemic-related changes in operations and health and safety protocols were implemented on an agency-by-agency basis. DSPs faced staff shortages, disrupted routines, and inadequate supplies of personal protective equipment.<sup>1</sup> A national survey conducted to understand the effects of COVID-19 on the DSP workforce found that 62% of respondents reported working additional hours to respond to staffing shortages and 50% experienced physical and/or emotional burnout.<sup>1</sup>

To examine gaps and strengths in emergency response and gain a better understanding of how DSPs have experienced and been impacted by the pandemic, Oregon opted to include a COVID-19 survey supplement with the 2020 and 2021 NCI State of the Workforce Surveys. Results from the 2020 COVID-19 supplement can be found in our previous report.<sup>10</sup> In this section, we share select findings from the 2021 COVID-19 survey supplement, including operations changes, health and safety protocols implemented, vaccination and testing requirements, and wage adjustments. We also evaluated whether any of these operational changes were associated with staff turnover. There are limitations to the data from the supplement, as data were less complete in the supplement than in the main survey.

### Pandemic-Related Changes in Operations

The pandemic response prompted a wide array of additional operational changes across agencies that continued into 2021. These changes included discontinuing programs or service offerings (42 agencies; 20.6%), permanently closing locations or sites (23; 11.3%), requesting an increase in the home/site licensed capacity (16; 7.8%) and making new changes or continuing 2020 changes in how some home supports were delivered – such as delivering traditionally out-of-home services in a person’s home, virtually, or outside (91; 44.6%). Similar to 2020, agencies that closed locations had a mean turnover rate that was nearly 35% higher than those that did not ( $p < 0.01$ ).<sup>10</sup> In 2021, agencies that discontinued programs or service offerings had a mean turnover rate that was 20% higher than agencies that did not ( $p = 0.01$ ).

### Pandemic-related Implementation of Health and Safety Protocols

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, most agencies implemented changes in health and safety protocols in 2020 and carried over many of these changes into 2021. These changes included pandemic related visitor policies (94.6%), COVID-19 related health and safety trainings for DSPs (92.7%), and changes to physical sites to optimize social distancing requirements (70.6%).

### COVID-19 Testing and Vaccination

Beginning in 2021, the pandemic supplement collected data on COVID-19 testing. Of the agencies participating in the survey, 95 (46.6%) reported that some or all DSPs were required to regularly get tested for COVID-19. All agencies had mandatory vaccine requirements for DSPs, per Oregon Administrative Rules.

Almost half of participating agencies (98; 48.0%) reported that at least one DSP left employment at the agency as a result of testing and/or vaccine requirements. However, the survey did not differentiate between DSPs that separated due to testing requirements from those who separated due to vaccination requirements. Further, there was no association between testing requirements and turnover or vacancy rates.

### Pandemic-Related Bonuses and Wage Adjustments

In addition to the salary increases described above, many agencies offered additional bonuses or wage-adjustments to some or all DSPs. In 2021, 150 (73.5%) agencies reported that they gave bonuses to some or all DSPs, and 45 (22.1%) reported temporary hourly wage increases for some or all DSPs. Many agencies also offered financial incentives to DSPs who were fully vaccinated (86; 42.2%).

We found that agencies that offered either pandemic-related bonuses ( $T = -3.36$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) or temporary wage adjustments ( $T = -2.53$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ) had higher turnover rates than agencies that did not, but there was no association with vacancy rates. Financial incentives for vaccination were not associated with turnover or vacancy rates.

## Summary and Recommendations

The state of the Oregon DSP workforce improved significantly in 2021: average hourly wages increased and DSP turnover rates decreased. However, while turnover in Oregon is now lower than the national average<sup>5</sup>, increased DSP vacancy rates indicate that agencies are still struggling to recruit and retain DSPs. Action is urgently needed to 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. Continue to increase hourly wages. In our analyses, higher starting wages were associated with lower turnover. That finding confirms prior data showing the same association nationally,<sup>11</sup> as well as our previous findings in Oregon that showed an association between higher average wages and decreased turnover (2018–2020 NCI Staff Stability Survey data).<sup>10</sup> Oregon agencies implemented a moderate pay increase in 2021 and this increase corresponded with a decrease in turnover compared to prior years. However, turnover and vacancy rates still remain high. (Note: Oregon DSPs have received further pay increases since 2021. Data are not yet available on turnover and vacancy rates since those pay increases were implemented.)
2. Provide key benefits and career growth opportunities. Provision of paid time off, health insurance (especially coverage beyond what is included in the Oregon Health Plan), and other benefits can help with reducing turnover. We specifically found that providing benefits to all staff, without restricting them to only full-time employees, was associated with lower turnover and vacancy rates. Career growth opportunities should include the development of a career path for DSPs and enhanced training, such as community college partnerships and apprenticeship opportunities.
3. Build on ongoing efforts to 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>2</sup> The DSP role requires considerable effort, skill, and dedication; these qualities should be recognized and rewarded. The Oregon Office of Developmental Disabilities Services (ODDS) has been addressing the workforce crisis by building partnerships with case management entities and employment agencies throughout Oregon and the country; disseminating recruitment and retention grants; and supporting innovation in service equity. While these and other efforts of ODDS have increased the direct support workforce in Oregon, the shortage continues. Future long-term strategies, actions and funds are needed. 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. The majority of DSPs are 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>12</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.

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## Appendix: 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.

### 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.

### TEST FOR TREND

A trend test is used to determine if a set of values is increasing or decreasing over time, or if the set of values has remained constant over time.

### 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

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