

NYS Talent Development Consortium Direct Support Professional Core Competencies Project

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Introduction - Need for Change in DSP Role Definitions and Expectations

The culture in which supports and services for individuals with developmental disabilities has evolved to become increasingly person-centered with a strong emphasis on personal choice. In addition, a greater emphasis has been placed on ethical practice and a high level of competence when providing supports and services. The nature of these components has led to OPWDD's identification of the need to establish a set of Core Competencies that combine the technical skills for the provision of high quality services and supports, with more value-based skills needed to assist people with disabilities to make their own decisions, and live and work within the community.

The job of the direct support professional is physically and cognitively challenging. The hard work that many DSPs do needs to be validated in a code of ethics and a set of core competencies in order to improve the understanding by the general public and the families seeking those services, of their role in assisting individuals to lead their own lives. In recognition of this need, a Steering Committee and Workgroup were formed to research and develop the core competencies that will be taught to all DSPs in the developmental disabilities system in NYS in order to achieve each of the goals listed below. The anticipated end result of this more than one year long process is the provision of improved quality of services and supports, greater satisfaction with the services received by the persons served and an improved ability to recruit and retain highly qualified candidates to the field of developmental disabilities services.

Goals for the Initiative

1. Improvement of the Quality of Supports Delivered

By explicitly stating the requirements for both technical and value-based skills, the expectations of the DSP, the person served and the family and advocates will be set to appropriate levels. The expectations for the quality of service, held by an individual, can be molded to more appropriately reflect the roles that the DSP are to fulfill. This pairing of expectations with satisfaction levels is extremely important to the development of trusting, professional relationships. It is the development of these professional relationships that heavily impacts the perception of quality of care provided. How many times have we heard of physicians who have a high level of skill but "no bedside manner"? This comment stems from the perception that the relationship the patient has with the physician is purely medical, when in fact, most

patients desire a certain level of “caring” from their personal physicians. The same is true for the perceptions of quality of care delivered by the DSP. There must be a healthy balance between technical skills and genuine caring about the person being served. When these two factors are in place, the perception is that there is high quality care being delivered. The combined effects of standardized training, implementation of the Code of Ethics and improving the overall status of the DSP as a career, feeds the development of caring relationships and ultimately a sense of high quality perceived by the person served, their families and advocates.

2. **Focus attention on the person served & achievement of desired outcomes**

As our current social culture becomes more open to, and accepting of individuals with developmental disabilities, it has become more important to help the individuals supported to live the lives they choose to live. The DSPs may be younger adults with limited life experiences who have had only slightly more opportunity to set goals for themselves and achieve them. The skills for teaching decision-making are complex and can be challenging to deliver to individuals with developmental disabilities. It may be just as challenging to assist the person served to decide on what his/her desired outcomes are, and then how to work toward achieving them. It has become increasingly necessary to provide the DSP with more training and mentoring in these skills. The focus of supports and services has shifted away from a “custodial” type of care to one of engaging the person served in making as many of their own choices as possible. In addition to making choices, emphasis on engaging the person served in setting and achieving their personal goals has increased. The roles of teacher, supporter, role model and more, are emphasized and require more training and preparation for the DSP to fill them, in the evolving person-centered culture.

3. **Standardize Training Topics**

Standardization of topics to be included in training helps to improve the quality of service provided. It is necessary to be able to assure that a DSP trained by one agency learns the same content that a DSP working for an agency across town learns. In this way families can expect the same level of knowledge and service, regardless of which agency ultimately provides the required services. Obviously, skill levels will vary with years of experience and exposure to a variety of settings in which the DSP has had the opportunity to use his/her skills. However, those core skills that are needed by the DSP to be able to function in his/her role will be present in each DSP that is trained according to the standardized content for curriculum.

4. **Improve Professionalism**

One of the first steps in becoming a professional is becoming socialized to practices of that profession. Since we desire that DSPs be considered a professional career and not a job, it will be important for all DSPs to understand and assume the characteristics desired of the competent professional. This includes both technical and value-based skills. The National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals (NADSP) has established a Code of Ethics for its members that NYS has adopted, with the NADSP's permission, for all of its DSPs. The Code of Ethics outlines nine qualities that are considered appropriate and necessary guidelines for decision-making processes and actions that support the people being served. It is expected that DSPs will assume the characteristics expressed in the Code. By incorporating the code of ethics, as well as participating in life-long continuing education, the DSP will develop into the well-rounded, ethical and skilled professional that is desirable. This idea of being considered a professional is an appealing motivator for many. It is hoped that DSPs will enter the field, learn, grow and stay in the field because of the satisfaction and accomplishment that they will feel and for which they will be acknowledged.

5. Support Current DSP Employees

Current DSPs are a very dedicated group of people who work long and sometimes difficult hours every day. The provision of services to individuals happens on a 24/7 schedule. Employees must manage their own work environment and relationships while maintaining their own lives outside of work. The stresses of working nights, weekends and holidays can impact families. By providing training that assists the DSP in carrying out their duties, and additional skilled co-workers in the workplace, it is anticipated that the DSPs will feel more support from their employer. Elevating the work environment to a higher level as it relates to value-based decision-making that must occur on a daily basis in the work environment, by providing training and mentoring is intended to help the DSPs feel they have someone to turn to in difficult times at work or in their own lives. The overall improvement in the work environment that occurs because of reduced mandatory overtime and greater collaboration when dealing with challenges from individuals or their families will lead to less stress and conflict in the workplace and improved quality of the services and supports provided.

6. Improve Portability of Skills & Decrease Re-training Costs

As our current society is a very mobile one, we often experience movement related to jobs. If a DSP is trained in the standard topics of the Core curriculum, we can expect that if that DSP moves to another part of the state, the skills will be immediately applicable and not need to be re-trained. New training can then focus on agency-specific policy and procedures and not the skills for carrying out the roles of the position. This will save time and money and make it easier and safer to more quickly deploy the DSP into the field for assignment. The DSP can be confident in the knowledge he/she has achieved and will perform up to standards with greater ease as he/she will feel that their skills are respected. We believe this will continue to convince DSPs to return to the field for employment if they have to move to another region of the state, and they will be less likely to be enticed by other jobs.

7. Why a Code of Ethics?

It is acknowledged that the human services field, by its very nature presents uncertainty and variability. No single process can be applied in the same way to every person or situation. Human Services workers, including DSPs, must make decisions and take actions that are based on something more than pure policy and documented procedure. The NADSP Code of Ethics serves as a guidepost to DSPs to help them to think clearly and act decisively in the commission of their work duties. It outlines a set of values that puts the concerns of the person served first, when a DSP needs to make decisions. The Code articulates the set of values that guide the DSP to provide compassionate, skilled services that meet the specific needs of the people they are hired to serve. Since those specific needs vary widely, the Code helps the DSP to navigate the many options and select actions that are beneficial to the person served.

8. What is New in the Core Competencies?

The Core Competencies are preceded by the Code of Ethics, representing the idea that every skill in the competencies is tempered by the application of the values expressed in the competencies. The competencies are broken into seven goal areas intended to cover all aspects of a person's life, plus the concept of professionalism in the DSP. The seven goals include:

- Putting people First
- Building and Maintaining Positive Relationships
- Demonstrating Professionalism
- Supporting Good Health
- Supporting Safety

- Having a Home
- Being Active and productive in Society

The Core Competencies cover broader skill areas than we may have considered in the past. The tasks included as examples of the actions that may be taken, include less technical detail and greater value-based, decision-making skills. By doing this, the skill set of the DSP is broadened to include a wide range of technical “hands-on” skills as well as a variety of cognitive “heads-on” skills for thinking, decision-making, advocating, guiding, teaching and assisting the person to take the lead in directing his/her own life. This is a very big change from where we have been in the history of DSP training.

Since there are new skills included in the core competencies, new performance evaluations are required to be able to document the skills each DSP develops. The way in which we document these skills is more comprehensive in that we have designed the process to contain the assessment of the DSP’s skills by the supervisor, the person-served and/or family, as well as the DSP him/herself. This represents a more well-rounded view of the DSP’s skills from the perspective of each of the people affected by the DSP. In addition, the documents include a “start-to-finish” approach in documenting the skills, in that the strengths and weaknesses are noted in the performance document along with the feedback from the DSP. Both of those sets of comments serve to feed the plan for improvement/development that is made collaboratively and is also included in the document. In this way, the single document contains the evaluation of performance, the discussion and feedback and the plan for further development.

9. Will this cause a need for additional training and more work?

The Core Competencies are a standard for the practice of direct support. They are NOT simply a training program. This means that when we apply the Core Competencies to day-to-day practice they represent no more work than we already do when serving people with developmental disabilities. In some cases, it may actually be less work, because when the job is consistently done correctly and compassionately, the work does not need to be re-done by others. In addition, the work environment is more stable and lends itself to a more stable environment for the people served. When they know what to expect, they perform at a more consistent level too.

There will be some need for additional training for DSPs who have not had the opportunity to apply some of the value-based skills in their own practice prior to these competencies. We do not anticipate the need for agencies to entirely re-vamp their training programs, but rather, agencies will compare their current training to the Core Competencies. In those competency areas where they may have little training, additions will need to be made. An on-line resource list that is cross-walked to each competency will be made available so that trainers in need of content materials can search by content and find those sources, thereby avoiding the need to create it on their own. Much of the information is already being taught and put into place, so the additional time and effort will be directed more toward comparing the competencies to your agency training and helping supervisors understand how to assess the DSPs on the competencies using new evaluation tools. This function will become part of the standard operating procedure very quickly and should require no more attention than is currently paid.

10. Do we already do this?

The answer to this is definitely yes, in some areas, some of the time. Through implementation of the culture change initiative at OPWDD, coupled with the Core Competencies and Code of Ethics, one important end result desired is a corps of DSP professionals who understand that they are working in

partnership with humans who deserve respect, an opportunity for self-expression in every aspect of their lives and involvement in their community at whatever level they desire and can handle.

Today's individuals, their families and our society are ready for more integration, more personal involvement, more self-expression, more doing what the individual desires. Supporting the individual takes more skill than ever before. Involvement in the community, and with community members, represents a myriad of new skill requirements for the individuals as well as their support staff. We already teach many of these technical skills. We have more to do to teach each other, as well as community members, that the people we serve have skills of value to their community. This is a much more value-based concept. Value-based learning is a higher level function for everyone and will need highly skilled DSPs and others to support this next, large step toward the full integration of individuals with ID/DD into our communities.

11. How will the competencies help with managed care?

The competent practice of DSPs in a managed care environment will determine to a great extent the continuance and expansion of provider service contracts. As managed care unfolds and resources are redirected away from traditional congregate services and toward individualized services within family structures and other natural supports, DSPs will be functioning with less immediate oversight. For this plan to be successful, DSPs must operate with a broader skill set and a deeper ethical commitment.

Managed care organizations will be evaluating service providers not only in the area of financial accountability but also in service deliverables. Across our state, 90,000 DSPs comprise over 80% of the workforce. Preferred provider status—staying in business—will be achieved and maintained only if certain metrics are met in areas such as health, safety, incident reporting, community connections, customer satisfaction, meaningful relationships, integrated quality improvement, and other requirements. All providers will be competing with each other not just in meeting core expectations but excelling at them. The majority of provider systems improvement will be workforce performance. A provider for whom DSPs are strategically the second-most important person in their organizational culture will have a greater chance of succeeding than a provider for whom DSPs are under-valued.

12. What is meant by competency-based performance?

Competency-based performance, based on validated national standards, identifies three inter-related processes—knowledge, skills and attitudes—that are necessary to do almost any job well. This is especially true in human services. Unless all three are present, excellence in performance is compromised. Together, they lead to effective services and supports, satisfied clientele, worker confidence, and job retention. The US DOL describes the direct support profession as a “competency-based occupation requiring the attainment of...skills and knowledge as specified by the occupation and demonstrated by hands-on proficiency measurement....The DSP supports people with disabilities and others...to lead self-directed lives and contribute to the community. The DSP...works in a manner consistent with professional norms validated for direct support including ethical and skill standards. The DSP works effectively both independently and in teams.”

13. What is the purpose of the New York DSP Core Competencies?

These competencies are grounded in the nationally validated fifteen Community Support Skill Standards, the NADSP Code of Ethics and the United States Department of Labor 2010 standards for direct support professionals (DSPs).

Ninety percent of our workforce is trained to provide services in congregate care residential and day programs. The transformation plan of OPWDD will shift the focus away from group care to individualized supports. The Service Delivery System within NYS has the responsibility to prepare the DSP workforce to work in the unsupervised settings of personalized services for persons with IDD.

Today, DSPs remain practically invisible to the NYS Department of Labor. Similar professions in New York have their own occupational acknowledgement, such as home health care aides, personal assistants, certified nursing assistants, etc. DSPs do not have a consistent occupational definition with a uniform measure of practice. OPWDD has been challenged by our state's Department of Labor and Workforce Investment Boards to develop a consistent set of expectations. Developing a DSP career ladder with sturdy rungs begins with a consistent set of expectations in core competencies, advanced trainings, post-secondary education and other nationally certified credentials. Establishing a recognized profession will also afford greater opportunity for federal and foundation workforce grants.

Another important benefit to this approach is skill portability between and among providers. For example, DSPs can present to a future prospective employers copies of their performance evaluations as reflective of the quality of their skill set. Such portability may reduce the need for re-training in certain areas.

In general, DSPs in New York need a more robust skill set and deeper ethical base. From a managed care perspective, managed care organizations will be evaluating providers on service deliverables and performance metrics: personal outcome measures, community connections, health and safety, etc. Quality is measured and defined most graphically where a DSP and a person with IDD meet.

14. What is the purpose of Regional Centers of Workforce Transformation?

The Regional Centers are five locations of collaboration that blend service providers from the private and public sectors and stakeholder within the service system for the purpose of elevating the competencies and ethical base of direct support personnel. These Centers are a very important step in helping to change system wide cultural thinking about DSPs and effecting those changes collaboratively.

To protect the rights of people with disabilities and also help them realize their human potential, our system has adopted a code of ethics and a nationally validated competency program of development that needs to become rooted in practice. In order to build career ladders with sturdy rungs of achievement, there must be concerted grass-roots effort. A career path for DSPs should not involve leaving DSP work behind and becoming a different kind of professional, but rather earning and practicing graduated levels of direct support itself.

The NYS Talent Development Consortium has generated DSP Core Competencies that have been introduced to the service providers in the private and public sectors.

The roll-out of the Code of Ethics and Core Competencies as well as all aspects of workforce development, to be credible and taken seriously, must be accomplished locally in order to take root culturally in organizations. The job of a DSP is a business of sophisticated relationships that are both professional and personal. They are personal because the context of the work is individualized human potential, and they are professional because those who do the serving on a day-to-day basis must understand and practice the

high ethical principles that articulate to a broad and complicated set of skills. The code of ethics has nine tenets that inform and are infused into the seven goals, twenty-three competencies and sixty skills of OPWDD's robust DSP Core Competencies.