

## **Recognizing Direct Support Professionals: Past, Present and Future**

**By Joseph M. Macbeth**

First of all, I'd like to thank our nation's direct support workforce for their commitment and dedication to people with disabilities. Moreover, I'd like to recognize the complex skills and professional values it requires to be an effective direct support professional – one of the most challenging, yet rewarding occupations in the country. It's my wish that every direct support professional receives the due recognition they deserve during National Direct Support Professional Recognition Week and that we all take a moment to reflect on the incredible impact that direct support professionals have on the lives and personal outcomes of the people that they support.

I have the honor of talking with thousands of direct support professionals each year, many of whom tell me that they don't really need any formal recognition. They tell me that they feel a sense of deep personal satisfaction that comes from some internal source for helping others on their life's journey. I suspect for some of them that this might be true, but *everyone* appreciates a look in the eye, a handshake (or a hug) and a heartfelt "thank you" from a supervisor, a family member or someone with a disability who is on the receiving end of a skilled direct support professional's talent.

Since the deinstitutionalization movement of the 1970's, the duties of the direct support professional have evolved from that of a caretaker or an attendant who merely provided coverage on a shift, to someone who is an integral part of a person's life that provides comprehensive, person-centered support and shares a path toward a self-directed life for those with disabilities. The way others see direct support professionals has also changed during these forty years, and I believe that if we are going to continue sharing this path, then direct support professionals will have to become really good at connecting with community in all aspects of a person's life – home, work, play and worship (if he or she chooses). To illustrate this point, the ideological founder of the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP), John F. Kennedy Jr. wrote in 1996, "Quality is defined at the point of interaction between the staff member and the individual with a disability".

The United States is in the process of reforming the larger task of the healthcare industry, which includes services for individuals with developmental disabilities. Through the untiring work of self-advocates, families, direct support professionals, service provider agencies, and public policy makers, a largely institutional care system has been turned on its head by developing a myriad of community-based supports and service options over the past four decades. Now we must demonstrate leadership by preserving and advancing the successes of the past by embracing the work of direct support as a profession and attracting new generations of men and women who seek it as a career.

So, if we are to really embrace and strengthen that point of interaction between the staff member and an individual with a disability, then direct support professionals will require a lot more than recognition. They are going to need the tools to be effective community builders, possess the skills to work without a supervisor standing next to them and understand their professional ethics to do the right thing when no one is looking.

How are we going to do this? By providing [competency](#)-based training to all staff; embracing the use of technology that afford direct support professionals more time to spend working directly with the people they support; embrace, train and adhere to the [Code of Ethics](#); advancing a voluntary, portable national [credential](#) as the gold standard of direct support practice; and collect and evaluate workforce data, such as retention and turnover rates, worker wages, benefits, and training so that they can monitor their progress, learn from their experiences, and continue to develop good workforce policy going forward.

The NADSP and CQL share many values and principles when it comes to supporting people with disabilities. In most cases, when we discover “what really matters”, we’ve done so by developing strong and trusting relationships. Then it’s our mission to share the path to a rich and fulfilling life in their community of choice. Direct support professionals do this every day and as Mr. Kennedy said seventeen years ago, that’s where quality will continue to be defined.

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