

# Coordinating the NJ Direct Support Professional Career Path at Your Organization: Steps to take in implementing a successful workforce development program

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THE ELIZABETH M. BOGGS CENTER  
ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

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## Overview of the NJ Career Path

The NJ Career Path in Developmental Disabilities is a robust voluntary training program designed to provide continuing education, recognition, and professional opportunities to direct support professionals and in turn increasing the retention rate. Enhanced professionalism and educational opportunities increases the skills and confidence of staff. Increased retention leads to significant cost savings to organizations which can provide them with resources needed to invest in their staff and the supports they provide.

The NJ Career Path takes a multi-faceted approach to continuing education. Each DSP completing the Career Path must complete the required courses for each level they complete while being mentored by a peer and completing one portfolio activity for each course (7 activities per level). Upon successful completion of each level, DSPs receive a Certificate in the New Jersey Career Path in Developmental Disabilities. The NJ Career Path aligns with requirements for National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals Credentialing so that DSPs successfully completing have the opportunity to receive certificates from the State of NJ and national credentialing from NADSP.

**Coursework:** Coursework in Levels 1 & 2 is completed online through the College of Direct Support. The courses are listed in on the table below. Each course contains between 4 and 8 1.5hour lessons, each ending with a test. (Staff must complete the test with an 80% and have up to 3 times to take it). Level 3 combines online learning and classroom/seminar/conference workshops and courses with mentoring and portfolio development. The first Level 3 Concentration option is currently in development.

New Jersey Career Path in Developmental Disabilities	
<b>Level I</b>	
<b>College of Direct Support Courses</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct Support Professionalism</li> <li>• Safety at Home and in the Community</li> <li>• Documentation</li> <li>• Community Inclusion</li> <li>• Individual Rights and Choices</li> <li>• Teaching People w/DD</li> <li>• Cultural Competence</li> </ul>	
<b>Level II</b>	
<b>College of Direct Support Courses</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment Supports: Exploring Individual Preferences and Opportunities for Job Attainment</li> <li>• Person-Centered Planning</li> <li>• Supporting Healthy Lives</li> <li>• You've got a Friend: Supporting Family Connections, Friends, Love and the Pursuit of Happiness</li> <li>• Positive Behavior Support</li> <li>• Working with Families and Other Support Networks</li> <li>• Everyone Can Communicate</li> </ul>	
<b>Level III (Concentration) – IN DEVELOPMENT</b>	
<small>*Amount of required training and mentoring TBD</small>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental Health Supports*</li> <li>• Aging/End of Life</li> <li>• Employment Supports</li> <li>• Health Supports</li> <li>• Person Centered Planning/Inclusion</li> <li>• Multiple Disabilities</li> <li>• Traumatic Brain Injury</li> <li>• Autism</li> <li>• Supervision</li> <li>• Positive Behavior Supports</li> <li>• Leadership/Mentoring</li> </ul>	<p>Level 3 coursework to be completed online, using existing College of Direct Support courses and lessons uploaded to the CDS, in combination with classroom based training.</p> <p>NJ Specializations will align with NADSP specialization requirements, although there will be more specialization options in NJ.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">*Currently in development</p>

**Mentoring:** Each DSP completing the career path is assigned, by their agency, an experienced mentor to work with them. The mentor is someone who has already completed the career path and has demonstrated skills and dedication to the profession of direct support. The mentor is provided with training. The mentor and mentee are provided with work related topics focused on each lesson in the College of Direct Support to guide their conversation and help the mentee use learning on the job.

**Portfolio:** The portfolio provides a mechanism for the DSP to report on how s/he has used what was learned in the coursework on the job as they provide supports to a person with disabilities and/or enhance their professional role within the organization. Each DSP is required to complete 1 portfolio activity per CDS course taken. Each portfolio activity aligns with at least 1 NADSP Competency area, further promoting DSP opportunity to apply for national credentialing. The DSP is provided with a list of 3 suggested activities per course along with 1 option to design their own based on something they've done on the job.

**Certificate:** Upon successful completion of each level and revision and approval by the agency coordinator the DSP is issued a certificate in the New Jersey Career Path in Developmental Disabilities.

## Getting Started

### Creating Buy-In:

There are many reasons organizations would want to offer the Career Path to its staff. Career Paths are aimed at enhancing the quality of supports and services through providing the innovative training staff need to do their job well. While doing this, Career Paths also increase the professionalism of staff through increasing competence, confidence, and skills related to problem-solving and team work. Overall Career Paths and similar professional development opportunities have led to improved job satisfaction and reduced turnover.

Career Paths is a recommended method for increasing retention from the Direct Support Workforce Resource Center (funded through the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services) - <http://dswresourcecenter.org/tiki-index.php?page=Recruitment+and+Retention>. The Lewin Group, and organization contracted by CMS to do research for the DSW Resource Center as found that:

- There is a link between quality training and mentoring and higher retention
- Research supports competency based training based on specific outcomes that are essential for employment
- DSPs that are supported by co-workers are more likely to stay and mentoring programs have been found effective in reducing turnover and preventing burnout
- Efforts to increase responsibility and involvement of staff in decision making have been linked to increased job satisfaction and decreased turnover.

- Support from supervisors can decrease job related stress and the relationship between supervisors and staff plays a significant role in job satisfaction and intent to stay
  - Wright, B. (2009), *Strategies from Improving DSP Recruitment, Retention, and Quality: What we know about What Works, What Doesn't, and Research Gaps*

When discussing bringing the Career Path to an organization it is important to bring a variety of people to the table. The first people agencies tend to bring together are those holding administrative positions (Executive Directors, Directors, Trainers, HR Staff, etc...). It is also important to include those holding manager positions and DSPs as well as they will likely have important planning information related to need, interest, and making it work within the job structure. An organization's board (including stakeholders such as people using supports, family members and other public representatives) can also give useful perspective related to professional development.

### **Developing a Plan:**

The first thing to do is to determine how your organization's career path will be structured. In order to determine this you should answer these questions:

1. *How many DSPs will go through the career path at a time?*

It is important for organizations to have an idea as to how many DSPs they can successfully support to get through the career path at a time. It's usually good to start with a small manageable number. Organizations should also realize that all those that start may not finish for a variety of reasons so it's acceptable to add a few extra to keep the momentum.

2. *How much time do you want them to have to finish the first level? When would you start a second cohort?*

The Career Path should be offered using a specific schedule. Organizations should avoid offering the career path on a staff-by-staff/rolling basis as this can be extremely difficult to coordinate and keep track of. It is recommend that organizations start a cohort on a given date and have them go through the first level in 6-8 months. After this these staff could move onto the next level and a new cohort could start the first. Scheduling the Career Path in this manner makes things manageable and gives the DSP a clear schedule for completion.

3. *When with the Career Path work be completed?*

There is great flexibility for how agencies offer the career path. Some organizations give staff time on-the-clock to complete the work. Others require that the work be done on staff's on time. Some give their staff a set amount of time during the month on the clock and require that any extra be done on their own time. While giving staff time on the clock for training is most effective from a professional development perspective, any of these options can work given appropriate agency support.

4. *How will you meet with the participating DSPs?*

Experience has proven that staying in touch with the DSPs is critical to success. Many organizations have found that having monthly or bi-monthly meetings scheduled with the cohort helps to increase motivation and ensure successful completion. These meetings pose as a time for DSPs to share ideas, get technical assistance, and discuss their portfolio activities.

Some organizations have coordinated meetings with just their mentors and have left it up to the mentors to keep the DSPs moving along. This has also been successful. The important thing to remember is that coordination and follow-up are crucial to the success of any project.

5. *Who will review the DSPs transcripts and portfolios?*

At the present time it is the responsibility of the organization to review the DSP's College of Direct Support transcripts and portfolios for successful completion. Typically it is the organization's Career Path coordinator tasked with this job. Other possibilities include having a team of reviewers that take the time to review and comment on the portfolios.

The Boggs Center has a review rubric that is similar to that used by the National Alliance for Direct Support Professional's in its portfolio review. This useful tool is available for organizations to use in their review processes.

Once it has been determined that the DSP has met all the requirements of the level (coursework, mentoring, and portfolio development) the agency completes a form and sends this to the Boggs Center for a certificate of completion to be issued to the DSP.

### **Materials you'll need:**

In order to start the Career Path you will need the following materials:

1. List of the Courses found in each Level of the Career Path
2. Portfolio Materials

There are specific portfolio materials for each course found in the Career Path. The Boggs Center will send organizations all the necessary materials including instructions for completion using either a zip file sent via email or mailing a CDS.

The portfolio materials for each course consists of the following:

- A list of discussion topics for each lesson.  
These topics are to be used by the DSP and his/her mentor to have conversations based on what s/he learned in the lesson. The DSP is to choose discussion 3 topics for each lesson and share ideas with his/her mentor. This important mentoring component helps to reinforce knowledge and promotes use of knowledge on the job.

- A list of Portfolio Activities/Work Samples for each course.  
Upon completion of each full course the DSP is expected to complete a Portfolio Activity/Work Sample. A list of 3 examples are given for each course, the DSPs may opt to complete one of these or they may also opt to complete an activity they design on their own. An activity they design on their own, must demonstrate how they used information from the lesson on the job and align with at least one of the NADSP core competencies (included with the portfolio completion instructions). Completion of these portfolio activities not only helps DSPs meet the requirements for a NJ issued certificate, but completion will also aid in application for national credentialing through NADSP.

Portfolio activities/work samples may be completed through use of a variety of media including: Written essays, videos, audiotapes, demonstration of documentation, project development, scrapbooks, pictures with descriptions, etc... The goal is to demonstrate use of the information found in the course that was just completed and mastery of a given DSP competency area.

If a DSP wishes to apply for NADPS credentialing they are also required to complete a summary statement for each portfolio activity/work sample. Questions that can guide the development of this summary are included in the portfolio section for each course. These are not required for NJ certification, but do provide a mechanism for thoughtful reflection on the work that has been done.

Upon completion of the mentoring and portfolio activities/work samples, the DSP, mentor, and agency career path coordinator sign off thus approving completion.

### 3. Career Path Certificate Request Form

Once a DSP has successfully completed all the coursework, mentoring, and portfolio activities/work samples for a level the agency career path coordinator shall complete the Certificate Request form and secure the appropriate signatures. Complete of this form confirms that all the requirements have been met. Upon receipt and review of this form by the Boggs Center a certificate will be issued to the DSP.

## Recruiting Staff to Participate

### Mentors

#### Getting Started:

Unless you already have a set of qualified, experienced staff with knowledge of the courses in the Career Path, it is likely you will have to have a grandfathered method of mentoring for your first cohort of DSPs completing Level 1 of the Career Path. This can be done through having a trainer and/or career path coordinator perform the duty of a mentor by meeting with the first cohort of DSPs either as a group or individually to complete the required mentoring discussions.

#### The First Mentors:

Once the first cohort of DSPs completes the first level, it can easily be a natural progression, if provided necessary training, to become the mentors for the second cohort of DSPs starting Level 1. Supporting these DSPs to be mentors provides yet more advantages to organizations by further reinforcing the knowledge of both mentors and DSPs, providing additional professional opportunities by way of mentoring, and increased the ability of staff to practice effective communication and work as a team.

#### Selecting Mentors:

It is important to recognize that just because a DSP complete the career path, it doesn't automatically make them a good mentor. The DSP may not want the added responsibility or s/he may not have the skills or qualities of a good mentor. Organizations may want to consider a selection process for choosing mentors that will support future career path DSPs. Some organizations have opted to hand pick their mentors through the recommendation of supervisors, trainers, and or career path coordinators. Many have found an application process to be useful in selecting quality mentors.

#### Qualities of a Good Mentor

Regardless of the process your organization chooses to select its mentors there are some qualities that good mentors typically have. They include:

- Willingness to share skills, knowledge, and expertise.
- Demonstrates a positive attitude and acts as a role model.
- Takes a personal interest in the mentoring relationship.
- Exhibits enthusiasm in the field.
- Values ongoing learning and growth in the field.
- Provides guidance and constructive feedback.
- Respected by colleagues and employees in all levels of the organization.
- Sets and meets ongoing personal and professional goals.

#### Role of a Mentor

Since the role of mentor is important to the development of skills and competency, they must understand what there role is. The role of a mentor includes:

- Be seen as a leader & role model throughout the organization.
- Completed courses and demonstrate knowledge of the topics presented in the Career Path coursework
- Support DSPs to actively use what they've learned through courses while on-the-job.

- Have conversations (face-to-face, phone, email, etc...) with DSPs about the coursework, on-the-job competencies, and portfolio activities.

It is recommended that a DSPs direct supervisor not also be their mentor as this can inhibit the supportive relationship. It is however important that supervisors/managers be informed about the mentoring relationship in order for them to understand the difference between the two roles. Mentoring can prove to be a benefit to supervisors as it supports them in helping staff to develop good problem-solving and communication skills while promoting work related competency.

### Mentor Training

It is important that mentors be trained in their role and the process of being an effective mentor. Many agencies already have or may develop a training outlining the role of mentors. The Boggs Center also offers a mentoring training to organizations who offer the career path to their staff.

## **Direct Support Professionals (DSP)**

### Selecting DSPs

There is no single way to select DSPs to participate in the Career Path. The main idea to keep in mind is that those participating should be the DSPs you want to stay at your organization. In New Jersey as DSP must have completed all of his/her mandatory Pre-Service Training prior to participating in the career path. Some agencies make specific qualifications for a DSP to participate and consider some of the following:

- Time on the job
- Quality of Work
- Desire for further professional development
- Recommendations from supervisors and/or other colleagues.

Many organizations have a short application process in order to have a fair and equitable way to select DSPs to participate. Often it takes some promotion and individual recommendations to get the first couple cohorts of DSPs started. Interest in participation tends to increase after the first few cohorts, so having an application process can be advantageous especially as the project progresses in an organization.

Some agencies are getting DSPs started with the Career Path during their orientation processes. They accomplish this by including a College of Direct Support, Career Path Level 1 course (or selection of lessons) as part of orientation related training. While this doesn't make a new DSP an active participant in the Career Path it does help them to get started in the coursework while providing them with basic knowledge they need on the job.

### Incentives & Recognition

There are no statewide specified requirements related to providing incentives to staff completing the various levels of the NJ Career Path. It is, however, important for organizations to recognize that a great deal of time and effort go into completion. Agencies have provided

staff a variety of different incentive options for completing the Career Path which include, but are not limited to: salary increases, bonuses, an extra day off, a funded trip to a national/state professional conference, gift cards, etc...

Another incentive is college credit. Staff completely levels 1 & 2 of the Career Path are eligible to receive 9 credits toward an associates degree in human/social services if enrolled in that program at select NJ Community Colleges. This is currently available at Raritan Valley Community College. Other academic institutions are being pursued for acceptance as well.

Recognition is also critical and often affordable way organizations can highlight the dedication and work of the DSPs participating in the Career Path. Recognition can take place in a variety of ways including: a luncheon, an organization-wide event where the participants are presented with certificates, participants names displayed publically, change in position title (i.e. DSP), role of mentor, etc...

## **Marketing**

### **Letting Staff Know about the Career Path Opportunity**

Communication is an essential function of any successful organization. Getting the word out about the Career Path is a key to making it a success within an agency. You need to make sure that all staff are aware of its availability and what they need to do to participate. Here are some of the ways organizations have let their staff know the Career Path is available:

- Presentation at a Staff Training Day
- Individual Presentations at Staff Meetings
- Article in an Organization Newsletter
- Flyers in pay checks
- Keeping it an agenda item at: Staff meetings, manager meetings, organization administration meetings, etc...

Include managers and DSPs in your marketing efforts. Nothing is more effective than hearing about a professional development opportunity from those actually on the frontline. Managers are critical components of a successful career path so it is important to have them on board promoting it to their staff. Hearing from other DSPs about how participation in the Career Path can enhance their professionalism is of great benefit too.

## **Supporting Career Path Participation**

### **Regular Meetings**

Agencies offering the Career Path have found that one of the best ways to keep their staff moving through the coursework is to hold regularly scheduled meetings to discuss their efforts. These meetings can take place on a monthly or bi-monthly basis and can be framed to have an agenda that focuses on: current course, portfolio assignment feedback, and peer-to-peer support time.

### **Technical Assistance**

Agencies using the College of Direct Support and/or the Career Path should have a key point of contact for their staff to obtain technical assistance from. This person may be the Career Path coordinator. While participating DSPs should be encouraged to use their mentors first for assistance related to the coursework and portfolio, there should be a second line of leadership that can be supportive of their efforts. This person should also be available if there are issues related to computer technology, overall questions about the program, issues with mentoring, etc...

### **Support with Portfolio Development**

As mentioned in the previous pages, Portfolio Activities/Work Samples can be completed using a variety of media options. Writing still tends to be the most commonly used method of completion and for many staff (particularly those who have been out of the classroom a while) this can be intimidating. Some agencies have assisted staff in portfolio development by offering the following support:

- Including Portfolio review as part of their cohort meeting agenda (peer review/mentor review)
- Holding writing workshops that not only benefit portfolio development, but also enhance the quality of documentation and other educational efforts as well.
- Career Path Coordinators give feedback on first portfolio activity/work sample before the DSP moves on to the next.
- Mentors review portfolios and give feedback with DSPs prior to submission

### **Keeping Momentum**

It is important to recognize that no program can be successful if there isn't follow-through and support. The Career Path is no different. Organizations that gave little support to their staff and did meet with them frequently to touch-base saw less staff complete the work.

### **Evaluation**

Organizations are encouraged to find the way that works best for them to offer the Career Path. Periodic evaluation of processes is encouraged to determine if the way an organization is offering the career path is effective, building competency, and yielding the desired results. Evaluation may include: feedback from staff, surveys, review of impact over time, etc... Upon evaluation, agencies may learn that some adjustments are needed to improve their Career Path program.

**NADSP Credentialing**

As mentioned throughout this manual. The NJ Career Path aligns with NADSP credentialing. This is the only nationally recognized credential for Direct Support Professionals. It aims at further professionalizing the field of direct support and lends to the provision of quality supports. To learn more about this credential and how to apply go to: [www.nadsp.org](http://www.nadsp.org).

**Technical Assistance to Organizations**

Organizations are encouraged to network with each other around sharing best practices for offering the Career Path.

Boggs Center Staff are available to provide technical assistance to agencies as they develop their Career Path processes. Materials related to the Career Path are available by contacting Colleen McLaughlin or Shellyann Dacres (732-235-9300 or [cdsta@umdnj.edu](mailto:cdsta@umdnj.edu)). They also offer a workshop entitled “Making the College of Direct Support Work for Your Agency” that focuses on using the College of Direct Support Curriculum and offering the Career Path. Please go to: [http://rwjms.umdnj.edu/boggscenter/projects/direct\\_support.html](http://rwjms.umdnj.edu/boggscenter/projects/direct_support.html) for more information.