**OVERVIEW OF DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL WORKFORCE**

**What is a Direct Support Professional?**

Direct care professionals (DSPs) provide frontline caregiving services. They help older adults and people with disabilities to get dressed, eat their meals, bathe, take their medications and participate in daily life. Direct support jobs include: personal care, home health, supportive home care, respite, job coaching and day services that make it possible for people with disabilities and older adults to live independently in their own homes.

**Wisconsin’s Direct Support Professional Workforce**

According to estimates from PHI, a national research and policy organization focused on the direct support workforce, there are roughly 103,000 direct support professionals in Wisconsin. PHI data indicates[[1]](#footnote-1):

* 81% of Wisconsin direct support professionals are women
* 30% are people of color
* The median hourly wage is $12.73
* 41% of workers rely on public assistance programs like Medicaid or FoodShare
* There will be an estimated 173,900 direct support job openings in Wisconsin from 2016 to 2026

**Direct Support Professional Workforce in Crisis**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Wisconsin was already experiencing a direct support professional shortage so severe that was jeopardizing the health, safety and welfare of older adults and people with disabilities. A 2016 survey by the Survival Coalition found that 85% of individuals in need of direct support services could not find enough workers to cover all of their shifts.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, direct support professionals have put themselves at risk by continuing to enter people’s homes to provide needed caregiving services. They are truly on the frontlines of this pandemic as best practice is for COVID-19 patients who do not require hospitalization to self-quarantine at home.

Survey results from 300 direct support professionals released by the Wisconsin Personal Services Association, Wisconsin Long Term Care Workforce Alliance, Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations and InControl Wisconsin on November 18 reveal that the workforce is at a breaking point:

* Nearly half of respondents work a second job in order to support themselves
* 76% of respondents say the main reason they have considered leaving the profession is for a higher-paying job or one that provides benefits
* 60% of respondents are either “very likely” or “likely” to remain in the profession if it led to additional health care certifications like CNA, LPN or RN
* 73% of respondents are “very likely” to stay in the profession if there were consistent raises or bonuses

**What Direct Support Professionals Are Asking For**

Direct support professionals overwhelmingly state that while their work is rewarding, low pay and a lack of advancement opportunities make it difficult to stay in the profession. Systematic changes are needed to professionalize the direct support workforce in order to attract and retain high-quality workers. Proposals developed by the Governor’s Task Force on Caregiving offer a road map to move forward. Direct support professionals are asking policymakers to act on the following proposals:

* Reform the way providers are paid within Wisconsin’s long-term care system to reimburse them for actual costs of direct care, with a rate that reflects the dignity and importance of the work and that allows them to not only compete with other employers for qualified candidates in their communities but to pay workers a living wage
* Statewide Direct Support Professional Training, which would create a career ladder leading to a CNA certification
* Public Assistance Earnings Disregard, which will allow direct support professionals to take on more hours without losing access to needed public benefits
* Continuation of the Family Care Direct Care Worker Fund, which provides bonuses to direct support professionals
1. <https://phinational.org/policy-research/workforce-data-center/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)