

Wisconsin Direct Support Workforce at a Breaking Point

The Wisconsin Personal Services Association, Wisconsin Long Term Care Workforce Alliance, Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations and InControl Wisconsin conducted a survey of nearly 300 direct support professionals in November 2020. The results reveal that the state's direct support workforce is at a breaking point. Direct support professionals overwhelmingly indicate 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.

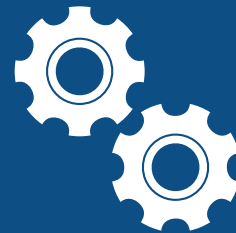
The importance of increasing wages

Despite the inherent difficulty of the work, access to a job with a higher wage or a position with health insurance or more affordable insurance were the top reasons direct care workers gave for considering leaving their current position.

Median Hourly Direct Care Wage: \$12.73



Nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of respondents said they would stay in their current direct care position if there were consistent bonuses or pay increases



More than half of responding direct care workers work a second job to support themselves or their family.

Access to Health Care Benefits



About one-quarter of respondents either don't have health insurance or make so little they qualify for state-funded Medicaid/Badgercare.

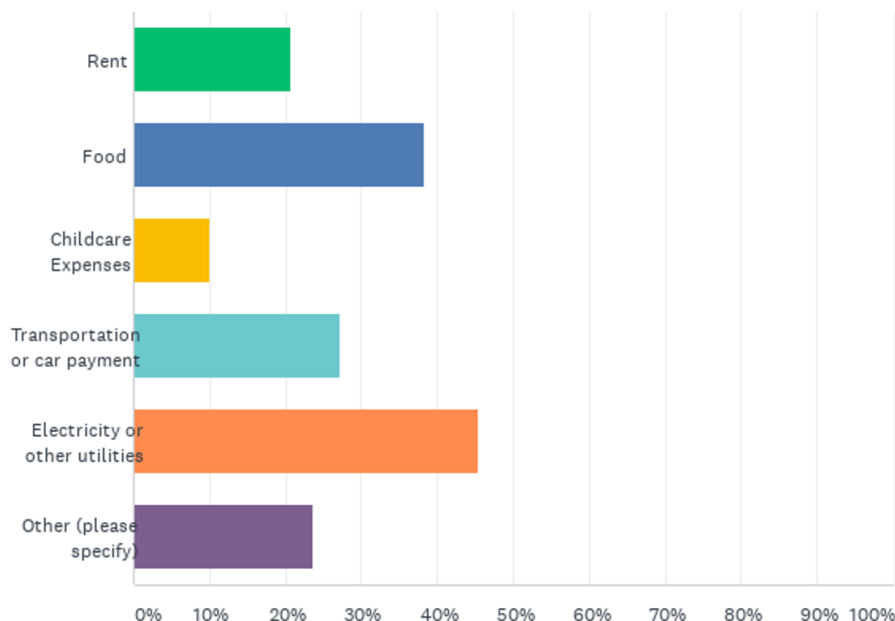
More than one-third who were offered health care through their employer said it's unaffordable.

2/3 of direct care workers spend more than \$200 a month on health care costs (co-pays, premiums, out-of-pocket costs) with 16% saying they pay more than \$300.

Nearly 200 respondents indicated they had to make the choice to pay their health insurance instead of another living expense with 45% saying they have had to forego paying electricity or utilities and 38% reporting they went without purchasing food.

Q13: If you have ever had to make the choice to pay your health insurance instead of another living expense, mark the items below you did not pay because of health insurance expenses?

Answered: 198 Skipped: 92



Pay so Low Workers Qualify for Public Benefit Programs



More than 1 in 10 have turned down working additional direct care hours to suppress their wages to continue to be financially eligible for public benefit programs like health care, food stamps or childcare.

Need for a Career Pathway

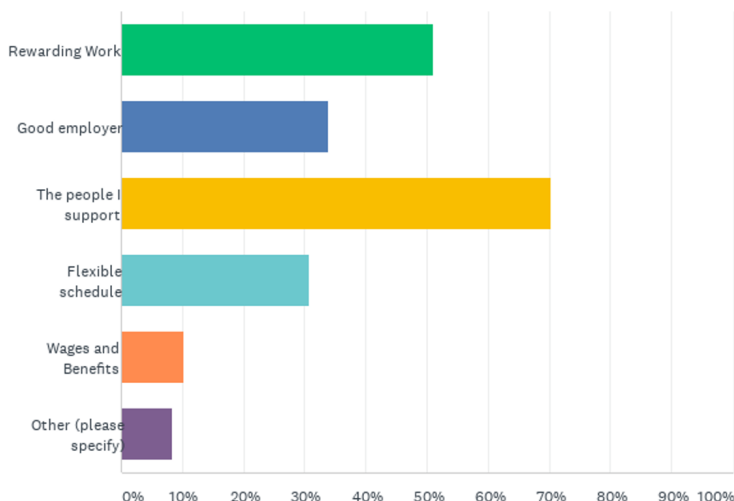


Nearly 2/3 of responding direct care workers said they were likely or very likely to continue to work within the direct care field if there was a career pathway to attain a certified nursing assistant (CNA) or other nursing degree (no pathway currently exists).

The Importance of the Work

Q2: What are the main reasons you stay in the direct care workforce position?

Answered: 290 Skipped: 0



Direct care workers indicate they stay with the profession mostly because of concern and care for the people they support (70%) and the rewarding nature of the work (51%).

Stories From the Frontlines

A Sample of Survey
Comments

“The rate of pay is unequal. We assist individuals with getting dressed, going to work being social, etc. There are times when they make more at the job that I helped get them to than I make at mine.

We are underpaid, under valued, and not respected as an essential care provider. Most communities only see nurses, they do not see the role we play. We might not be medical, but we are essential! Higher wages are needed.”

“This is a stressful, demanding job and pay needs to be increased because what we do requires skills similar to nursing. It’s a shame because good, caring people are hard to come by for low wages and no benefits.”

“With COVID-19 present, you gamble everyday with your life and the lives of your children and family by being an essential worker. It is scary and it is challenging when all you know is working in the healthcare field.”

“It is an essential job that is viewed very poorly. Individuals talk about access to independent living for those with disabilities, but the means (direct care workers) to give them that independence lacks respect, pay, benefits.”

“Pay is not commensurate with the responsibility of the job. Our most vulnerable people are at risk.”

“Too many good, caring employees leave due to the low wages.”

“I love my job, but it is time to be appreciated as an essential worker.”

“I have a BSN and could make more than 2X as much money, but I have a passion for my clients. That may have to change when I’ve gone through all of my savings to survive even though I work overtime every week because they can’t find enough staff because of the low pay.”

“I could leave my job and work in fast food or at a grocery store and start out making more than I do.”

“I enjoy being a caregiver. I find it rewarding and very important. Low wages make keeping my commitment to this provision very frustrating.”

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“As a direct care support worker at a small agency, we have not had a wage increase in several years yet the cares that our clients need continue to increase.”

“I work a part-time job to make ends meet.”

“I love the work I do. It is very hard to make a living. We are sometimes the best part of our participant’s day, and we are dedicated to our career, but the amount that we get paid, and when we have to choose to buy food or gas to get to work, it is not an easy decision. Our participants depend on reliable staff that want to be there, and if we are not making enough to survive, it’s hard to find the staff that they deserve.”

“At this time, I feel we are on the front lines because of COVID-19, and we don’t have the right PPE to be safe. I have been in this field for 35 years and, as I have aged, I feel I may need to leave sooner than I would have because of COVID. Taking care of our most vulnerable human beings has been a calling for me.”

“Being a direct care worker is an amazing job, however the pay does not equal the work put in daily. The pay doesn’t allow for quality workers, and that is unfair to those we serve.”

“The pay is less than Kwik Trip, and I am an RN”

“The pay is way too low for the amount of health care provided! Fast food workers and employees at Target make more per hour. Care work is a hard and exhausting job.”