

# How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted direct support professionals across the United States?

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## Background

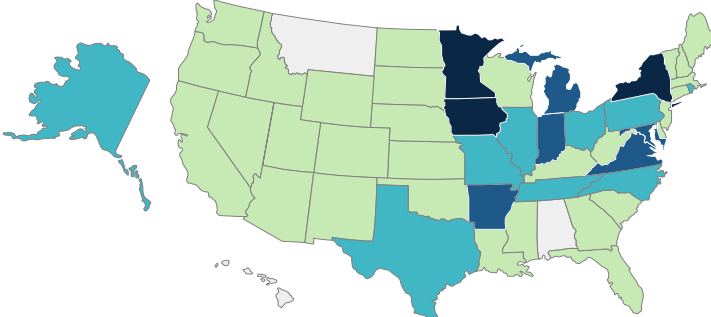
- The direct support workforce provides an array of critical supports making it possible for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to live, work, and thrive in their communities.
- There is no Bureau of Labor Statistics occupational classification for direct support workers and they are often categorized with home health aides, personal care assistants, certified nurse assistants, and others.
- Providing home and community-based supports for people with IDD, however, requires specialized skills and competencies that are not reflected by the low wages due to underfunded Medicaid-reimbursed rates, limited access to benefits, and lack of respect afforded to this essential workforce. This was the backdrop of an additional layer of challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Purpose

In March of 2020, many businesses and schools followed safety protocols, closed their doors, and began working and participating remotely. For the vast majority of direct support professionals (DSPs), this was not an option. As we learned from friends and colleagues across the country of the mounting challenges in providing supports safely to individuals with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, we knew it was important to hear directly from DSPs about their experiences. In response to this need, the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration collaborated with the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals to reach a large sample of DSPs from across the country. Staff from the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration and the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals knew it was important to hear directly from DSPs and frontline supervisors about their experiences. In

response, we developed a series of three surveys that were completed by over 18,000 respondents from across the country. The findings from these surveys provide critical information about DSP experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, DSP experiences are informing effective policy and practice decisions about what is needed. These findings help better prepare for potential future waves of this or other pandemics.

### Number of respondents in the 12-month follow-up survey by state/territory of employment



no respondents 1-100 respondents 101-250 respondents 251-400 respondents more than 400 respondents

**This survey was a convenience sample, and three surveys were launched at three points in time.**

	Dates when survey was available	N (respondents)
Initial survey	March – April 2020	8914
6 month follow up	November 2020 – January 2021	8846
12 month follow up	June – July 2021	5356

# Initial survey findings

March–April 2020, n = 8914

## Wages and extra pay

24% are receiving extra pay due to COVID-19 risks



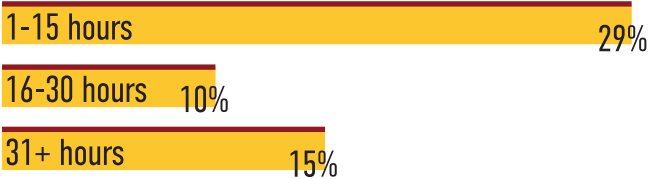
**\$13.63** average wage of DSP before pandemic

\*This is higher than the national median wage of \$12/hour due to most respondents having worked in their positions for more than 3 years.

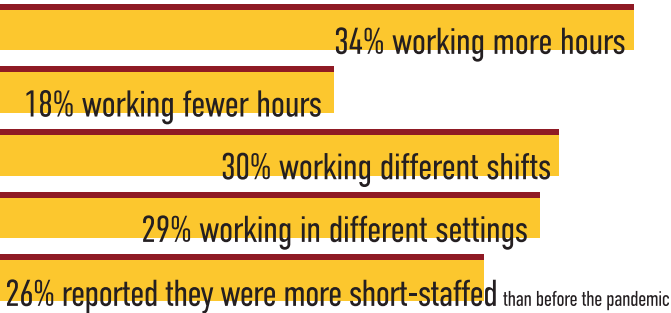


74% are primary wage earners in their household

## Additional hours worked per week



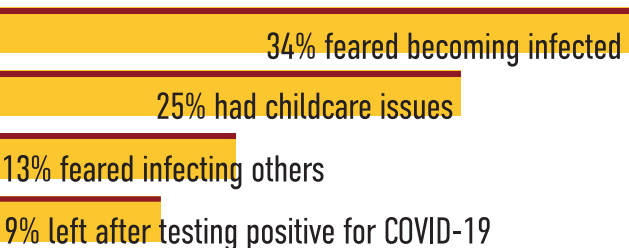
## Respondents experienced significant schedule changes



## Pandemic effects on DSP turnover



42% knew someone in the DSP workforce who left their job due to the pandemic. Of those:



# Six month follow up survey

November 2020–January 2021, n = 8846

## SAFETY MEASURES

DSPs were asked to report on the kinds of personal protective equipment (PPE) provided by their employer, whether they had adequate training in using PPE, and other safety measures that were taken.

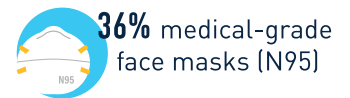
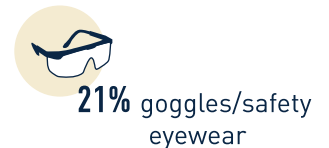
I have had an adequate supply of PPE to keep myself and the people that I supervise safe



I participated in a training on how to safely use PPE



I have had resources about COVID-19 available to me



## Number of people supported with COVID-19 by setting type

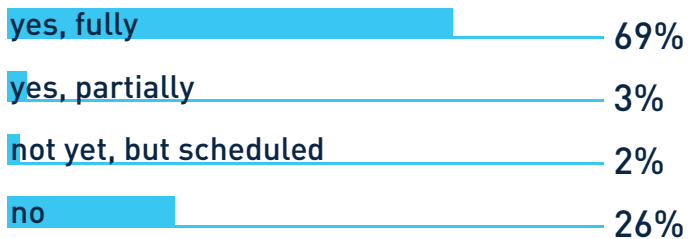
	Setting type		
	Agency/facility	Family/individual home	Community job/employment
Number of people supported	%	%	%
None	54%	70%*	53%
1-2 people	18%	17%*	22%*
3-5 people	14%	7%*	15%
6-10 people	8%*	4%	5%
11 or more people	6%	2%*	5%
Total	100	100	100

\* Family/Individual Home had a significantly higher percentage of supporting no people with COVID-19 and lower percentages of supporting 3-5 and 11 or more people. Community job/employment sites had higher percentage of supporting 1-2 people with COVID-19. And, agency/facility sites had a higher percentage of supporting 6-10 people with COVID-19.

## 12 month follow up June-July 2021, n = 5356

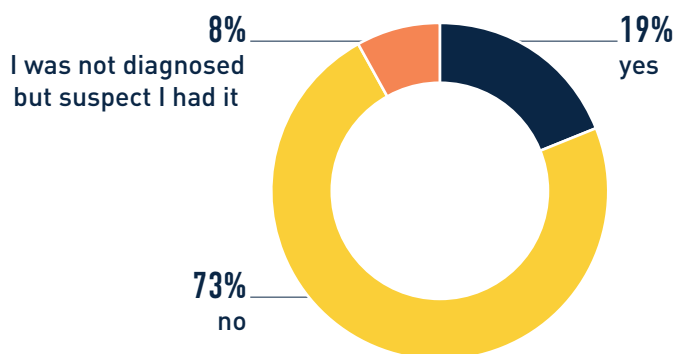
### Vaccination status

Respondents reported whether they were vaccinated against COVID-19.



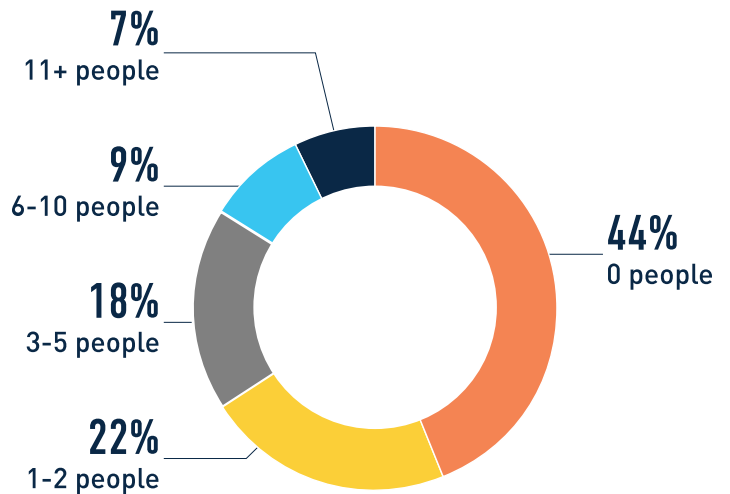
### COVID-19 diagnosis

Respondents reported whether they were diagnosed with COVID-19.



Of those 26% who were not yet vaccinated or had a vaccine scheduled, we asked them to report their reasons for vaccine hesitancy. 54% said they do not feel it is safe, 22% did not feel they needed it, and 21% did not believe in the worth of the COVID-19 vaccine (respondents could select more than one reason).

### Percentage of people of supported in the 12-month follow-up survey with COVID-19 diagnosis



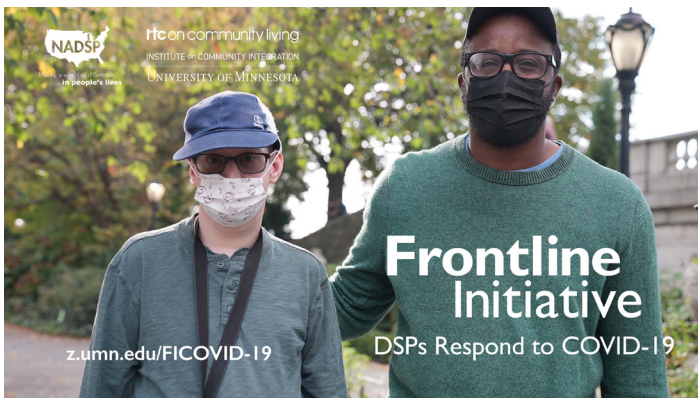
## Key recommendations

- Ensure DSPs are identified as essential workers in comprehensive, organized and funded response plans at national and state levels for additional waves of COVID-19 and future pandemics.
- Develop vaccination campaigns that target DSPs.
- Access to childcare and support if schools or day-cares close.
- Wage increases for essential workers commensurate with the increased level of exposure.
- Access to career ladders that lead to increased skills and compensation.
- Create systems-level pathways and incentives to enter this workforce.

## PSAs and FI issue

[z.umn.edu/vaccinePSAs](https://z.umn.edu/vaccinePSAs)

Get vaccinated. We take care of very important people.



Hewitt, A., Pettingell, S., Bershadsky, J., Smith, J., Kleist, B., Sanders, M., Zhang, A., Dean, K., & Kramme, J. (2021b). *Direct support workforce and COVID-19 National surveyreport: Twelve-month follow-up*. Minneapolis: Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota.

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