

# SUMMARY REPORT

## Recognizing the Mental Health Needs of an Essential Workforce

### One Year Later: Being a Direct Support Professional in the Time of COVID-19

#### **Azrieli Adult Neurodevelopmental Centre**

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## What is the study about?

Azrieli Adult Neurodevelopmental Centre scientists have been examining the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) in Ontario. We wrote a report about their experiences in [2020](#). This summary is an update on how Ontario DSPs reported they were managing one year later.

## What did we do?

DSPs completed a survey about their mental health needs in June - July 2021. We asked DSPs about:

- Their personal circumstances and work environments
- COVID-related stressors faced by them and by people with developmental disabilities
- Their current mental health
- Efforts to seek mental health supports and barriers to doing so
- Suggestions on how to best support DSPs moving forward

## Whom did we hear from?

We heard from 462 DSPs. A subgroup of 105 DSPs had completed the survey two times prior (summer 2020 and winter 2021). The people who completed the June 2021 survey were very similar to the people who completed the survey a year prior:

- 85% identified as women
- Just over half were age 45 years and under and came from across Ontario

- One quarter of DSPs had two years of experience or less, and one third of DSPs had worked in the field for over 20 years

## What did we learn?

Similar to a year prior, both people with developmental disabilities and DSPs continued to be seriously impacted by living and working through the COVID-19 pandemic, including the potential exposure and public health restrictions.

### COVID-19 exposure

One year later, a greater proportion of DSPs have been working in settings with COVID-19 exposures:

- 75% of DSPs supported clients tested for COVID-19 (54% in 2020)
- 89% of DSPs knew other staff who were tested (74% in 2020)
- 19% of DSPs supported people who tested positive (5% in 2020)
- 34% of DSPs knew other staff who tested positive (10% in 2020)

### Challenges experienced by people with developmental disabilities during COVID-19

One year later, a greater proportion of DSPs reported that clients experienced distress:

- 68% of staff reported increased aggression (62% in 2020)
- 82% of staff reported increased mental health concerns (75% in 2020)
- 49% of staff reported increased physical health concerns (33% in 2020)

## DSP mental health during COVID-19

COVID-19 specific stress was lower one year later according to DSPs, but general distress was higher:

- 66% of staff reported that they felt increased stress at work (69% in 2020)
- 49% of staff reported that they were afraid of falling ill with COVID-19 (56% in 2020)
- 59% of staff reported that they were afraid they would pass COVID-19 on to others (67% in 2020)

***35% of staff reported experiencing moderate to severe distress, compared to 25% in 2020***

We asked DSPs about the current challenges they were experiencing at work. In contrast to the first wave of the pandemic, when some of their main concerns revolved around infection prevention and control (IPAC), the most common challenges identified a year later were:

- The ability to engage in meaningful activities (60%)
- Access to family and friends (58%)
- Workload (52%)
- Communication and/or support from management (42%)
- Financial compensation (37%)

## DSP strategies to manage stress

- 69% reported maintaining social connections with families and friends

- 65% reported engaging in leisure activities and hobbies
- 64% reported practicing self-care
- 28% reported seeking mental health support

Although staff recognized the importance of mental health supports, nearly half (43%) reported barriers to doing so, including:

- Financial barriers (26%)
- Having the time to seek supports (24%)
- Stigma and/or not knowing where or how to get help (10-12%)

The 2020 report emphasized the importance of staff feeling that they were supported by their agency. In 2021, over half of staff (56%) reported that they felt supported by their agency.

### **Moving forward**

When asked what would be most helpful to them moving forward, over half of DSPs endorsed the following:

- Spend time with family and friends (65%)
- Time-off (59%)
- Ability to engage in meaningful activities and hobbies (50%)
- Financial compensation (50%)
- Return to normal responsibilities (50%)
- Extra staff coverage (50%)

## What does this mean?

It is very important that we continue to monitor and address the mental health of DSPs, an invisible workforce, and at the same time provide the necessary mental health supports to the people they work with. To address the mental health needs of DSP's, CAMH together with the Provincial Network on Developmental Services launched the [Cultivating Community Wellness](#) initiative in spring 2021. This community of practice has been developing and sharing mental health and wellness resources to Ontario Developmental Service agencies and offering monthly educational activities to support staff wellness. Participant feedback thus far has been positive.

While wellness supports are required, it must be recognized that work circumstances remain incredibly challenging. Interventions are needed at the client, staff, and organizational levels. This work has focused on the perspectives of DSPs working in Ontario's developmental sector. It is also important to understand the perspectives of individuals with disabilities, of families, and of agency leadership. Reports capturing these different perspectives are underway.