



# The Issue

Direct support professionals (DSPs) work tirelessly to support people with developmental disabilities—in their homes, workplaces and communities. People with developmental disabilities particularly need this support during COVID-19 as they have more mental and physical health problems than the general population and face many barriers in accessing health services and community supports. During the pandemic, DSPs are now playing a critical role in keeping people with developmental disabilities healthy and safe. DSPs are part of the province’s essential workforce and, like many, have experienced additional and unique stressors because of changing roles, work conditions and ongoing public health measures.

Health problems in combination with having a developmental disability make the people that DSPs support particularly vulnerable to experiencing serious and adverse outcomes related to COVID-19. People with developmental disabilities

also face unique risks from not always understanding or being able to follow public health measures such as physical distancing and wearing masks. In addition, many people with developmental disabilities also require support in their daily activities and rely on staff coming into their homes.

As the pandemic progresses, there is a need to promote the mental health and resilience of all front-line workers, and to support people working in higher-risk settings. Mental health is health for the more than 25,000 DSPs who support people with developmental disabilities in Ontario. It is critical to ensure that we address the unique needs of this workforce and the people with developmental disabilities they support. If we fail to support DSPs, we also put people with developmental disabilities at increased risk of both coronavirus and non-coronavirus health complications, and further overwhelm both our health care system and developmental services sector resources.



Photo credits (clockwise from top left): Reena, Participation House - Durham Region, Vita Community Services

# What is the study about?

Azrieli Adult Neurodevelopmental Centre scientists examined the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of DSPs—an often invisible and forgotten workforce. Our results highlighted critical issues unique to this sector that can be used to tailor workplace mental health interventions to the needs of these essential workers and support the health of both staff and the people with development disabilities they work so hard to support.

# How did we assess staff needs?

A province-wide survey of DSPs was conducted in July 2020.

Staff were surveyed about:

- their personal circumstances and work environments
- COVID-related stressors faced by them and by people with developmental disabilities
- their current mental health
- mental health services and supports available for DSPs
- their suggestions to better support DSPs going forward.

# SURVEY



Photo credits: Vita Community Services (left), Reena (centre and right)

# DSP Survey

## Participants

868 DSPs from across Ontario responded to the survey.



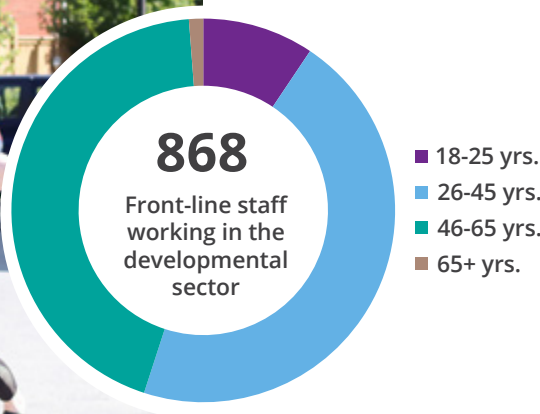
Photo credit: KW Habilitation

SURVEY

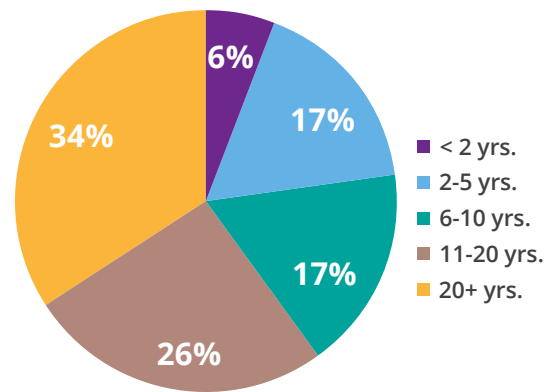
### Gender



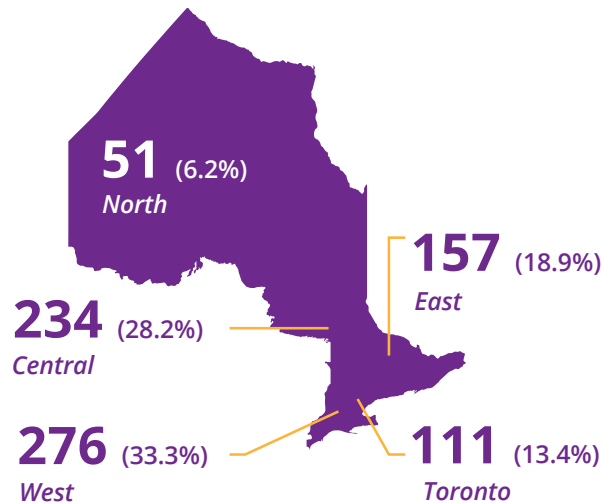
### Age



### Years of experience



### Location of Employment



## What did we learn?

### Impact of COVID-19-related restrictions

Both people with developmental disabilities and staff are affected by COVID-19 and COVID-19-related public health measures and restrictions beyond simply contracting the virus.

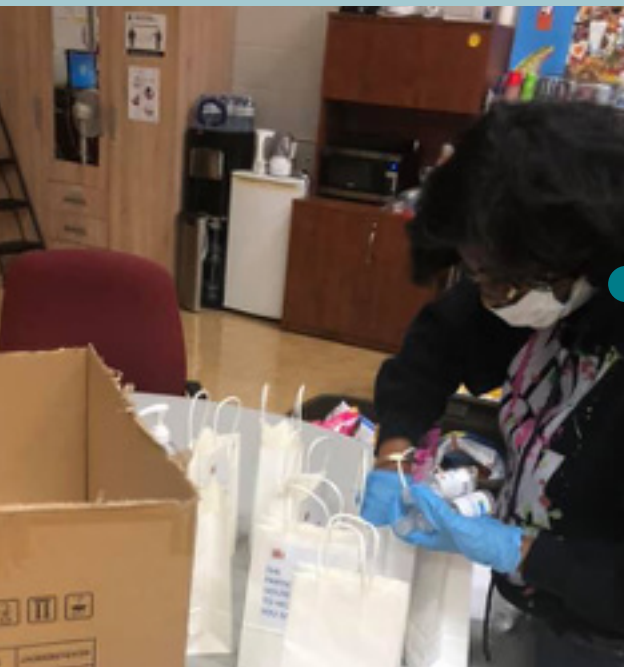
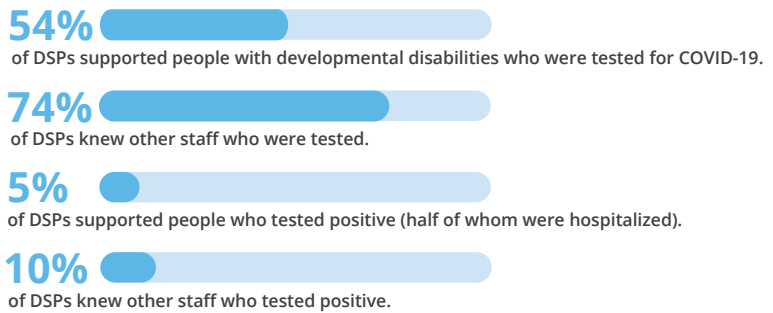


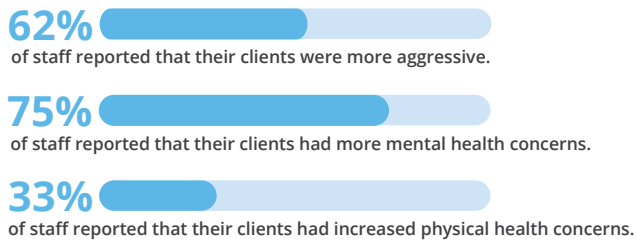
Photo credits: Participation House - Durham Region

### COVID-19 testing

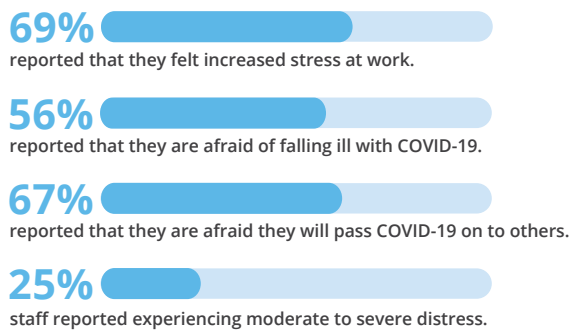
Staff were asked whether they knew about other staff and clients who had been tested for COVID-19. Our study found:



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



### Staff mental health during the pandemic



**SURVEY**

### Key concerns raised by staff related to COVID-19

- infection prevention and control procedures (e.g., access to personal protective equipment [PPE], clear guidance and training)
- the impact COVID-19 is having on the health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities (e.g., changes in routines and loss of activities, the inability to see family and friends, difficulty understanding safety procedures)
- changes in work roles and responsibilities (e.g., longer hours, lack of vacation, staff shortages, colleagues not staying safe, stress of redeployment)
- financial impacts (e.g., worries about job stability, loss of income as a result of “one employer” policy, unpaid sick time, removal of pandemic pay, non-reimbursed costs of protective equipment)
- impact on personal health and well-being (e.g., increased risk of burnout because of prolonged stress, limited time off because of staff shortages, fears about reopening and a second wave, reduced family contact, risks to self and family)

### Common strategies staff used to manage their stress:

- practising their faith
- maintaining social connections with family and friends
- engaging in leisure activities and hobbies
- practising self-care and seeking mental health supports (formal and informal).

### Organizational strategies staff found helpful:

- financial compensation for the risks and responsibilities involved in their work
- acknowledgment and appreciation from their employer
- frequent opportunities for team check-ins and peer support
- being able to take vacation, or an approved leave of absence
- increased access to health services (e.g., counselling, psychotherapy, massage).

### Key topics staff wanted to learn more about:

- staff mental health and wellness promotion (e.g., anxiety and stress management, mindfulness, coping with burnout, self-care, fostering resilience, coping with the unknown)
- supporting the mental health of people with developmental disabilities
- employee rights and ways to advocate for themselves (e.g., if concerned about inappropriate PPE).

Photo credits: Participation House - Durham Region (left), KW Habilitation (right)





# Recommendations

This study addressed the need to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and well-being of DSPs, an often-invisible workforce. Through our survey, we learned the ways in which COVID-19 and associated restrictions have affected the people who provide critical services, as well as the impact on people with developmental disabilities that receive these supports.

Many agencies have already recognized the concerns raised by staff and are working hard to implement organizational strategies to address these challenges, which will be described in a follow-up report. Together, these findings and recommendations can help to build capacity and resilience within the developmental sector and between sectors to cope with the ongoing pandemic.

## Moving forward, we need to:

### Recognize the essential nature of the work DSPs do

1

**DSPs have identified being recognized as essential workers by agencies, government and the public as an important support strategy.**

It will be critical to continue to include the work of DSPs in policy and practice initiatives as conditions change and we are faced with new challenges because of COVID-19. Furthermore, feeling seen and heard is an issue faced by people with developmental disabilities and the sector more broadly. Efforts that recognize the challenges of the sector can also help to support its staff.

We heard in our study that many agencies have worked hard to put the rights of employees front and centre; however, there have also been situations where **staff feel unheard**, and where they feel **undervalued in their essential role, and insufficiently protected in their work**. Continued efforts are needed to support enhanced communication strategies where staff questions are answered, their concerns addressed, and their perspectives valued. In addition, staff need to know where they can communicate concerns as they arise about their rights to healthy, safe and decent work conditions. Agencies can continue to support and provide guidance on what procedures to follow if a staff member feels that they are at risk.



## Support the mental health of DSPs

**2 DSPs need similar access to mental health supports and resources as health care and long-term care workers: this includes self-directed support, peer support, counselling and psychotherapy.** In addition to clinical resources, staff also need access to mental health information and opportunities to engage with other DSPs. For example, a virtual space could facilitate DSPs connecting with peers, sharing information and supporting each other: the space

could be like the website [Real Xchange](#), but tailored specifically to DSPs as a hub for knowledge exchange, collaboration and learning. A common information hub should not replace agency-specific resources and practices but can help staff within agencies to learn from each other. Such a hub could also include easily accessible stress management tools, such as mindfulness.

## Support the mental health of people with developmental disabilities

**3 The health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities affect staff roles and responsibilities, and staff's own mental health.** Managing the increased difficulties experienced by people with disabilities can make the job of DSPs more difficult and in some cases less safe. Strategies that address staff stress can also have secondary benefits for the people with developmental disabilities who staff support. Similarly, addressing the mental health needs of people with developmental disabilities can in turn ease staff's stress.

Policies and clinical services to improve the mental health of adults with developmental disabilities are desperately needed across Ontario. Capacity building efforts like [Project ECHO](#) that partner DSPs with health care providers to learn about how best to address mental health problems should be expanded and available across the province. Resources and tools should also be available to support the mental health of adults with developmental disabilities during this and future pandemics, and part of standard agency training. DSPs can play an important role in shaping such policies and practices, as well as designing and delivering curriculum.

## What's next

This work is part of a larger initiative to support the mental health and well-being of staff and people with developmental disabilities during COVID-19. Please look for our upcoming reports on the perspectives of executive directors and senior managers, as well as the second phase of our survey comparing how staff are doing in the fall of 2020 as compared to July. We will also be working with partners on upcoming wellness initiatives for staff, family caregivers and people with developmental disabilities.

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### To cite this report:

Bobbette, N., Hamdani, Y., Thomson, K., Abou-Chacra, M., Volpe, T. & Lunskey, Y. (2020). *Recognizing the Mental Health Needs of an Essential Workforce: Being a Direct Support Professional in the Time of COVID-19*. Toronto: CAMH.