**MENTAL HEALTH AND COPING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19:**

**PERSPECTIVES OF DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS IN CANADA**

Nicole Bobbette, Queen’s University; Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Megan Abou Chacra, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Katie Cardiff, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Yani Hamdani, University of Toronto; Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Kendra Thomson, Brock University; Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

& Yona Lunsky, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

**Objectives:** Direct support professionals (DSPs) are known to be among the many front-line workers that can experience significant work-related stress. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in additional and unique stressors for DSPs as a result of changing roles, conditions, and the ongoing need to implement public health measures (e.g., activity restrictions, social-distancing, masks, hand washing). As the pandemic has progressed, the need to promote the mental health and resilience of all front-line workers has become increasingly recognized, and efforts have been made to support those working in higher-risk conditions (e.g., essential services – healthcare, long-term care, congregate care settings). Currently, there is limited understanding of the current mental health status of DSPs in Developmental Services and there is a need to go beyond mainstream mental health initiatives, to specifically target workplace strategies that recognize the unique conditions, concerns and needs of DSPs in this sector. The aim of this study was to understand the mental health needs of DSPs in the Developmental Services sector during COVID-19, and how these needs change over during the pandemic.

**Methods:** A longitudinal survey design. Participants were full and part-time workers employed within the Developmental Services sector in Canada. The online survey was distributed through social media and developmental disability community agencies over a 5-week period from July 2nd to August 10th 2020 (T1) and November 20th to January 8th 2021 (T2). Demographic information was collected about age, gender, ethnicity, and years of experience in the sector. The survey included both open and closed ended questions. Participants provided information about their mental health, exposure to COVID-19 at work and the impact of COVID-19 on people with developmental disabilities. This poster will report on a targeted analysis of three open ended questions related to staff concerns, current coping strategies and identified needs. Content analysis was the primary analytic approach for these questions.

**Results:** There were868 DSPs that participated in the survey at T1 and 170 at T2. Data analysis is in progress. Initial results: DSPs at T1 reported concerns with infection control and procedures, the impact on mental health of people with developmental disabilities, changing work roles, financial impacts and impacts on their own personal health and well-being. Concerns reported by DSPs at T2 have focused primarily on the impact of the pandemic on the mental and physical health of people with developmental disabilities.

**Discussion/Conclusions:** DSPs continue to face new and changing work demands as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities have remained at the forefront of DSPs concerns overtime. This study is one of the first in Canada to highlight the mental health needs and concerns of DSPs. Recognition of this group as an essential workforce should include increasing the accessibility for mental health support and a greater emphasis on the mental health needs and wellness of the population they support.