**IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DIRECT SUPPORT WORKERS WORKING WITH ADULTS WITH INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES: A RURAL ONTARIO CASE STUDY**

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**Objectives:** To date, there is limited understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 and associated social and physical distancing measures on direct support professionals (DSPs) working in residential and community settings supporting adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). There has also been little acknowledgement of the innovative ways that direct support workers, agencies and communities have been responding to these situations, especially in often under-resourced rural settings. The perspectives of DSPs need to be investigated and included. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the impacts COVID-19 and the associated public health measures and subsequent organizational policies and practices on the working conditions, care practices with, and care relations between DSPs and service users with I/DD.

**Method:** An instrumental case study of an agency supporting persons with I/DD was employed. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 key agency staff, direct support workers, and family members of service users with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Preliminary data analysis was informed by feminist theories of political economy, ethic of care and critical disability which attend to the relationship between care or social reproduction (Duffy, 2011), capitalism and the market processes, and the role of states (Armstrong, 2010); and ensures that explanations of social and material worlds begin with disability (Kelly, 2013). The research integrates these with a feminist ethic of care framework, which uses a relational approach to understand vulnerable and oppressed people (Tronto, 1993).

**Results:** DSPs reported changes in their working conditions in a multitude of ways including having to change jobs, reduced/changed working hours, and increased uncertainty in the working conditions such as last minute and on-call work shifts. DSPs also reported engaging in technology related training that enabled them to pivot to remote service delivery. Finally, DSPs discussed the impact of these changes in their working conditions on their own wellbeing and the continuity of care and quality of services being provided to the people they support.

**Discussion/Conclusion:** This research highlights the impact that COVID-19 and associated public health measures are having on the working conditions of DSPs working in a rural Ontario setting. The preliminary findings of this study also highlight the importance of understanding the care relations between staff and the service users they support, and how these are shaped by organizational polices and practices. Understanding the experience of DSP’s through a care relation lens is novel and contributes to the broader care theory scholarship (Armstrong, 2010; Duffy, 2011) which highlights the interrelation between conditions of work and quality of service/support delivery. Employing a relational lens warrants the inclusion of the perspectives of service users with IDD about the impacts of COVID-19 on their support delivery and the conditions of their everyday lives, which will be taken up by the authors in the next phase of the study.

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