

Foreword from the Editorial Team

Author Information

Claudiane Coutu Arbour,
Ann Hines,
Sue Hutton,
Yona Lunskey,
Jocelyn Tan

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
(CAMH) Azrieli Adult
Neurodevelopmental Centre, Toronto,
Ontario Canada

Correspondence:

Sue.hutton@camh.ca

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Foreword

Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) are an essential workforce, working tirelessly under challenging circumstances to support children, youth, and adults with neurodevelopmental disabilities. DSPs provide crucial person-centered and person-directed support that empowers individuals with neurodevelopmental disabilities to live self-determined and fulfilling lives.

Yet, in 2023, 35.5% of DSPs experienced moderate to severe distress tied to challenging workplace conditions, and a shortage of resources and supports for themselves and the people they support (Bobbette et al., 2024).

As an editorial team, we recognized a gap in how the field represents and values DSPs' experiences. Academic and professional voices are often well represented in journals and sector discussions, but the direct voices of DSPs themselves can be missing in these settings. This JODD special issue was created to highlight the issues of this workforce and to ensure the DSP voice is heard. We wanted to create a space where DSPs could share their own words, stories, and insights, and where their perspectives would be centered, valued, and amplified alongside academic and professional contributors.

We are not alone in our assertion that DSP wellbeing must be prioritized. This was reflected in the overwhelming number of high-quality submissions to this special issue, with enough to publish two *Journal of Developmental*

Disabilities volumes dedicated to DSPs. The outpouring of interest demonstrates that the moment is long past due to acknowledge the challenges and amplify the voices of DSPs so they can receive the recognition they deserve.

Our editorial team is composed of a wide range of people engaged in developmental services. We are current and former DSPs, academics engaged in neurodevelopmental research, clinicians,

and professors of DSW programs. Some of us have family members who receive support from DSPs, and we have relied on them during the vulnerable, difficult, and joyful moments of our lives. The well-being of DSPs is a topic near and dear to our hearts.

Inclusion was a core value in the creation of this special issue, reflecting its importance in the field of developmental services. As such, we paid attention to highlighting a diversity of perspectives and formats. In this issue, you will find a high volume of contributions from DSPs, along with people who receive support, academics, clinicians, and caregivers—presented through a range of reflections, poetry, art, and empirical articles.

This volume features poems such as *Caring Hands* by DSP Katelyn Provo and *A Call for Change: Navigating Loss and Healing in the Complex Journey of Grief in Developmental Services* by DSP Vriti Bajaj.

These pieces intimately show us the heart and deep compassion that DSPs bring to their work, as well as the heartbreaking realities of working within a system that can feel broken. Claudiane Coutu Arbour, another DSP, reflects on the reason she left the workforce despite her devotion to her clients, in *Pourquoi ai-je quitté? : Autoethnographie d'une intervenante de soutien direct en TGC* (Translation: *Why Did I Leave? Autoethnography of a Direct Support Professional in a Persistent Challenging Behaviour Setting*).

Self-advocates reflect on the crucial role DSPs play in the reflection piece *My Opinion on Direct Support Workers* by Allison Bobbette, the poem *Spoons of Support* by Nicole Flynn, as well as a collection of poems called *Ode to a Support Worker: The Unsung Hero* by Yvonne Spicer.

We also look back at Canada's history of institutionalization through *Reflections of a DSP on Institutional Employment*, where the lead author Jenna Kennedy contrasts their parents' work in institutions with their own role today as a DSP.

We close this issue with DSP Vriti Bajaj's *A Call for Change*, inviting us into the life of a DSP navigating the loss of a client, and searching for meaning while advocating for themselves, their client, and systemic change.

Our team hopes that this special issue highlights the essential skills, the deep compassion and committed advocacy that DSPs balance each day. The production of this special issue was guided by a shared goal: to shine a light on the voices of DSPs, ensuring they are seen, heard, and valued in academic and professional spaces.

We are so thankful to those who submitted their work, offered time for peer review, and supported the release of this important journal centering the voices of DSPs. We are also grateful for the DSP artists who submitted cover artwork that captures the spirit of the dedicated and passionate work DSPs: Harold Tomlinson and Kerri Kennedy at Hearts 4 Joy.

Most importantly, we thank the DSPs who do this critical work every day. You are the heart of this field.

Sincerely,

Claudiane Coutu Arbour, Ann Hines, Sue Hutton, Yona Lunsky, Jocelyn Tan

On behalf of the Nicole Bobbette, Josée Boulanger, Ann Fudge Schormans, Anna Przednowek, and Lisa Whittingham, the team that worked to conceptualize and make this special issue happen.

References

<https://www.camh.ca/-/media/research-files/dsp-summary-report-january-2024-final-pdf.pdf>