

Why DSPs Matter: Reflections from the DSP Fellowship Program

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Keywords

Developmental Services
Staff,
DSP,
Direct Support Professional,
Frontline Staff,
Mental Health,
Wellbeing

As Fellows of the Azrieli Foundation's Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence's Direct Support Professional Fellowship Program, we offer our reflections to introduce this special issue and share why it is so important.

The DSP Fellowship is a pan-Canadian group of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) who explore ways to strengthen our workforce and elevate the voices of care providers specializing in delivering services to people with developmental disabilities.

As DSPs, we want you to know how vital our work is in supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to live with dignity, autonomy, and inclusion.

For too long, our voices have been absent, our struggles invisible, and our contributions undervalued.

This special issue of the *Journal of Developmental Disabilities* is a powerful acknowledgment that our work matters—and that our stories deserve to be told.

We are thrilled that the journal is dedicating not one, but two volumes to DSPs. When we put the call out for submissions, we were overwhelmed with responses. DSPs, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and the research community all had something to say.

The inclusion of poetry, personal reflections from the field, and voices of people with disabilities, alongside research articles by developmental services scholars, makes this issue especially meaningful. It shows that DSPs are not only practitioners, but also thinkers, storytellers, and partners in knowledge creation.

This is more than a publication—it is a recognition of our role as a workforce, and of the complex realities we navigate each day.

As DSPs, we carry the weight of working in a field still shaped by historic dehumanization and exclusion of people with disabilities. We are right there beside them and feel this weight.

We struggle with limited resources, precarious employment, and low wages, while continuing to show up for the people we support. We face burnout, violence, trauma—often without recognition or support.

Our expertise in advocacy, supporting autonomy and self-determination, partnering with families and helping people navigate complex systems filled with barriers is unique, yet rarely acknowledged. We live with the daily disconnect between policy ideals and the lived realities of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Many DSPs leave the field, but for those of us here writing- we stay. We love our jobs, and we want to continue to work in this field, and that is why we want the world to learn about the issues we face as a workforce. We want to stay because we believe in a more inclusive society where everyone has a place. Without change, many DSPs will continue to leave.

But we need to do better, and we hope this journal shines a light on these important issues that DSPs face. These publications are about creating a more inclusive society. We believe we can be stronger as a broader community with the practices of inclusion that are so inherent in the work we do.

This journal gives us hope. We do this work with care and heart and by highlighting the essential work of DSPs, the journal affirms that our voices, expertise and well-being matters. It calls on governments, agencies, and society to recognize DSPs as the skilled and professional care providers we are, deserving of respect, stability, fair wages, and opportunities to grow.

We are proud to add our voices to this special issue.

May it inspire readers to see us more clearly, value us more deeply, and work with us toward a future where DSPs, and the people we support, can truly thrive. We hope you enjoy reading the articles, poems and reflections as much as we did.

We extend heartfelt gratitude to all those who contributed to the vital work of all DSPs.

The insights shared have been deeply shaped by three years of ongoing dialogue with DSPs across Canada—conversations that brought to light the challenges, triumphs, and unwavering commitment of those in this essential role.

We would like to also honour the contributions of Penny Goryk, Jodie Dessau, Juanita Forde, Scott Robins, Olabisi Bisira, Kirsten Jerstad and Shelby O'Brien. Together our collective DSP Fellowship voices enriched these discussions and helped inform the perspectives within this article.

The dedication of all participating DSP Fellows continues to inspire and strengthen the collective understanding of care work in the developmental disabilities sector.