

## **“We’re the Ones Holding It Together: CCCE DSP Fellowship Voices on System Change”**

**Foreward to the *Journal on Developmental Disabilities* Special Issue on DSPs Part 2**

### **Author Information**

Claudiane Coutu Arbour,  
Kirsten Jerstad,  
Fredrica Pottinger,  
Katelyn Provo,  
Jordan Wiley,  
Nikolay Potapenko,  
Edward Rawson,  
Sue Hutton

### **Correspondence:**

Sue.hutton@camh.ca

### **Foreward**

As Fellows of the Azrieli Foundation’s Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence’s Direct Support Professional Fellowship Program, we offer our voices once again to introduce Part 2 of a special issue. The DSP Fellowship is a pan-Canadian group of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) who explore ways to strengthen our workforce and amplify the voices of care providers specializing in delivering services to people with developmental disabilities.

This second reflection builds on the ideas of Part 1 of the *Journal of Developmental Disabilities* DSP Special Issue. In Part 1, we named the realities of invisibility, burnout, and undervaluation. Here, in Part 2, we turn to what we are seeing now: how ongoing system changes are

reshaping the conditions of our work, and the quality of support people experience.

### **“It Looks Good on Paper, But It Doesn’t Work Like That”**

We are Direct Support Professionals. We support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to live lives of meaning, autonomy, and belonging in their communities.

Across Canada, we are seeing shifts in how care is organized. As one DSP described, “*the system is shifting in care to simple coverage and task completion.*” Staffing models are increasingly focused on filling shifts rather than maintaining continuity. New or temporary staff are brought in quickly, often without the time to build relationships or understand the person.

“*It looks good on paper, but it doesn’t work like that when you’re actually there,*” one DSP explained.

We see the impact immediately. *“You lose the relationship, and once that’s gone, everything gets harder.”* Communication breaks down. People become distressed. What once felt stable can quickly become unpredictable.

### **“You Can’t Just Swap People ‘In and Out’ ”**

This work is built on relationships. It takes time to understand how someone communicates, what matters to them, and what supports their wellbeing. Much of this knowledge is not written down. It is learned through consistent, daily presence.

As one DSP put it, *“you can’t just swap people in and out and expect it to be the same. It’s not the same for the person.”*

Another shared:

*“We often have agency staff coming in who don’t even know the names of the people we care for, let alone their routines, communication styles, or triggers.”*

This creates real consequences. *“It creates stress for the individuals we support, and it puts extra pressure on the permanent staff who have to pick up the slack.”*

For people with complex needs, the absence of relationship and familiarity can escalate situations quickly. *“If they don’t know you, or you don’t know them, things can go from calm to crisis fast.”* Supporting those with behaviours that challenge can be difficult enough for DSPs. With system pressures like these, it makes it even tougher.

### **“We’re the Ones Holding It Together”**

DSPs often carry the responsibility of maintaining stability within systems that are stretched and changing.

*“Many of us who have been there for a long time are constantly taking on additional tasks to make sure things run smoothly and people are safe,”* one DSP shared. *“But the workload piles up, and it’s leading to burnout.”*

Another added, *“it feels like we’re the ones holding everything together, even when the system around us isn’t designed to support that level of responsibility.”*

We are often bridging the gap between what systems are designed to do and what people actually need. *“You’re trying to make it work so the person doesn’t feel all the gaps.”*

### **Staying Vigilant and Grounded in Advocacy**

This is also a moment that reminds us change is possible. One DSP reflected on recent advocacy efforts: funding cuts to disability services were reversed following public pressure, with renewed investment in disability supports, day programs, and community services.

As they put it, *“that shows we have to stay vigilant—when people speak up, things can shift.”*

As DSPs, we can take inspiration from the long-standing advocacy of People First and the disability rights movement led by persons with disabilities. Their work reminds us that real

change happens when voices are heard, and when systems are held accountable to the people they serve. As DSPs we salute the work People First does across the provinces.

### **A Critical Moment**

These changes are not happening all at once, but they are accumulating. Small shifts in staffing, funding, and expectations are reshaping the work.

As one DSP reflected, *“it’s not one big change. It’s all the little changes that are changing the whole job.”*

From where we stand as DSPs across the provinces and territories, we are seeing a critical moment for the workforce. We see how decisions made at a system level show up in people’s everyday lives. And sometimes those decisions move us further away from the goals of inclusion, dignity, and belonging.

### **What We Are Asking**

We care deeply about the people we support. To ensure our jobs are protected so we can in turn support people to live with stability, dignity, and meaningful inclusion, we ask:

- **Prioritize continuity of support. Relationships matter**
- **Value relational, person-directed work, not only tasks and check lists**
- **Invest in stable, fairly compensated DSP roles**
- **Strengthen training and professional development**
- **Include DSPs in system design and decision-making**

As one DSP said, *“just listen to the people doing the job. We see what’s actually happening.”* We are still here. And what we are seeing matters.

Written collectively by the CCCE DSP Fellowship