

## Strengthening Workforce Identity and Standards: A Case for a Professional Association Among Ontario's Direct Support Professionals

### Abstract

*This paper discusses the case for a professional association for Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) in Ontario, Canada. Drawing on existing literature and sector knowledge, we argue that the DSP workforce meets key criteria for professional status and is well-positioned for further professionalisation. Concepts central to professionalisation including criteria for professional status, professional identity, professionalism, and regulation are briefly outlined. We then use a SWOT analysis as a framework to assess the current state of the workforce. Workforce strengths included established competencies, ethical frameworks, and a strong values base, while weaknesses include workforce fragmentation and instability. Opportunities arise from current policy directions and workforce shortages, and increased recognition of DSP roles, while threats include financial barriers, workforce strain and risks to professional identity. We argue that a professional association represents a feasible and timely mechanism to strengthen workforce identity, improve quality of support, and enhance system-level accountability. Lastly, the paper highlights the importance of inclusive design, stakeholder engagement, and DSP-led governance in advancing this work.*

### Introduction

Approximately 25,000 Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) provide support to children, youth, and adults

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labelled with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) in Ontario (Bobbette et al., 2020). DSPs work across diverse settings, including residential, educational, and community environments, supporting daily living, social inclusion, and participation (Courtney & Hickey, 2016; Developmental Services Special Interest Group [DSSIG], 2017a). Their work requires complex interpersonal, ethical, and practical skills to support individuals' physical, psychological, and social well-being (National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals [NADSP], 2026). Despite their essential role, DSPs often face challenging working conditions, including high workloads, workforce shortages, and limited resources (Baines et al., 2017). These conditions are also often associated with stress, burnout, and retention challenges (Baines et al., 2017; Casey, 2011; Cunningham et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2021; Soucie-Vukmanich 2021). These longstanding issues were intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which further exposed structural vulnerabilities within the sector (Carter et al., 2025; Hall et al., 2022).

Across North America, initiatives have emerged to strengthen the professional status of DSPs and to raise awareness of their vital role in the social care ecosystem. Organizations such as the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP) in the United States (NADSP, n.d.), Alberta Disability Workers Association (Alberta Disability Workers Association, n.d.) and the Alliance of Direct Support Professionals in Manitoba (Alliance of Direct Support Professionals in Manitoba, n.d.) have been established to support the professionalisation of DSPs through education and training, advocacy for fair compensation, and regulations that ensure fair treatment and safe work conditions. In Ontario, policy initiatives such as *Journey to Belonging* and the Developmental Services Core Competency Framework signal recognition of the need for a skilled and consistent workforce (Government of Ontario, 2021; Core Competencies, 2022). The Core Competencies were designed to ensure that DSPs have the prerequisite behavioural competencies (i.e., values, traits, and behaviours) for "superior job performance" (Core Competencies, 2022). Further, these Core Competencies were developed to promote consistency across the sector, while recognizing "the professional nature of the work that direct support professionals do every day" (Core Competencies, 2022). While these initiatives may advance the skill development of those supporting individuals with I/DD, they do not provide the holistic change needed to address the broader challenges facing DSPs.

This paper reviews the case for developing an independent professional association for DSPs in Ontario. We first define key concepts such as profession, professional identity, professionalism, and professionalisation. We then distinguish between trade unions, professional associations, and regulatory colleges. Finally, we describe the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) for DSPs related to the case for professionalisation. SWOT analyses are often used in evaluation and are a helpful frame for understanding and identifying current and future steps (Teoli et al., 2023). We conclude with recommendations for next steps.

## Positionality

This paper is shaped by the authors' positions within the developmental services sector, including lived experience as former Direct Support Professionals and scholarly engagement in disability, health, social care and education systems. These perspectives inform our understanding of DSP roles, workforce conditions, and the potential value of professionalisation. At the same time, we acknowledge that our analysis reflects particular vantage points and does not fully capture the diversity of experiences within the DSP workforce or among individuals

labelled with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. We have sought to situate our arguments within relevant literature and policy contexts, while recognizing the importance of ongoing dialogue with a broad range of relevant parties in shaping future directions.

### **Conceptual Framing**

A profession is typically characterized by formalized knowledge, a defined scope of practice, ethical standards, and a commitment to public service (Adams, 2018; Cruess et al., 2004; Wallin & Young, 2021). DSPs demonstrate many of these features, including access to formal training pathways such as the Developmental Services Worker diploma and apprenticeship (Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2021; Skilled Trades Ontario, n.d.), as well as established standards of practice and codes of ethics (DSSIG, 2017a, 2017b, NADSP, nd., ADWA, nd., ADSPM, nd.).

Professional identity refers to a sense of belonging and recognition within a professional role, while professionalism reflects adherence to expected standards and behaviours (Professional Standards Authority, 2016). DSPs often work across multiple sectors, contributing to a complex but values-driven identity grounded in dignity and inclusion for individuals with I/DD, and maintaining relational practices to promote their quality of life. Professionalisation involves the formal recognition and organization of a workforce through structures such as standards, advocacy, and collective identity (Adams, 2018; Cruess et al., 2004; Levine & Bell, 2015). While DSPs demonstrate many elements of a profession, the formal mechanisms for collective representation and professionalisation in Ontario remain limited.

It is also important to distinguish professional associations from trade unions and regulatory colleges. Trade unions focus on labour rights and working conditions, while regulatory colleges are legislated bodies responsible for public protection, including licensing and disciplinary authority (Benton et al., 2017; Kmet et al., 2011; Zelisko et al., 2014). These forms of organization differ from professional associations, which support advocacy, professional development, and identity-building without formal regulatory authority (Canadian Nurses Association, n.d.).

### **SWOT Analysis**

SWOT analyses can help situate initiatives within the current working conditions, making it easier to assess the potential impacts and limitations (Teoli, 2023). Thus, conducting a SWOT analysis can help determine the readiness of DSPs for a professional association. Applying this framework to assess the promise of a professional association for DSP's allows us to identify internal strengths and weaknesses within the DSP Workforce and broader developmental services sector, while also recognizing external opportunities and threats within the current policy structure, system, labour market and other professions (Teoli, 2023). A summary of the SWOT analysis is presented in Table 1, with key elements elaborated below.

**Table 1***SWOT Analysis of a Professional Association for Direct Support Professionals in Ontario*

| <b>Strengths</b>                                                                                             | <b>Weaknesses</b>                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Existing established standards, ethics, and core competencies (DSSIG, 2017a, 2017b; Core Competencies, 2022) | Diverse and non-standardized educational pathways                            |
| Formal training routes (DSW diploma, apprenticeship)                                                         | Limited proportion of workforce with DSW-specific credentials (Hickey, 2019) |
| Shared commitment to values (human rights, dignity, person-centred support)                                  | Fragmented professional identity and lack of unified voice                   |
| Demonstrated autonomy and complex decision-making in practice                                                | Limited opportunities for DSP-led engagement                                 |
| Recognition as essential workers (Bobbette et al., 2020)                                                     | Workforce instability (burnout, turnover) (Ryan et al., 2021; Hickey, 2024)  |
| Emerging professional identity                                                                               | Variability in supervision (e.g., independent workers)                       |
| <b>Opportunities</b>                                                                                         | <b>Threats</b>                                                               |
| Alignment with provincial policy (Government of Ontario, 2021; Core Competencies, 2022)                      | Financial barriers to membership and development                             |
| Workforce shortages highlighting need for professionalisation                                                | Potential resistance from agencies                                           |
| Increased international recruitment (Statistics Canada, n.d.; HEQCO, 2023)                                   | Risk of added burden on DSPs                                                 |
| Potential alignment with regulatory developments (Government of Ontario, 2018)                               | Role confusion among families and public                                     |
| Growing recognition of DSP role                                                                              | Competition and risk of absorption into other professions                    |
| Opportunity for DSP-led governance                                                                           | Lack of sustained funding and coordination                                   |

***Strengths***

From a workforce and Ontario developmental services sector perspective, several factors support efforts toward the development of a professional association for DSPs. Foundational elements of professionalisation are already in place, including an established scope of practice, standards, and code of ethics (Developmental Services Special Interest Group [DSSIG], 2017a, 2017b), as

well as a provincially recognized core competency framework that articulates expectations for practice (Core Competencies, 2022). In addition, formal training pathways are available through Developmental Services Worker (DSW) diploma programs and apprenticeship certifications, contributing to the development of role-specific knowledge and skills (Ontario Colleges, 2026; Skilled Trades Ontario, 2026). The designation of DSPs as essential workers further reinforces their social value and the significance of this workforce (Bobbette et al., 2020).

While DSPs may practice in different environments, they are united in a strong values base that aligns with broader principles of professional practice, including commitments to equity, human rights, dignity, and relational care. These values, articulated in sector-specific frameworks, emphasize service, social justice, empowerment, and the importance of human relationships (DSSIG, 2017b), and are reflected in person-centred and person-directed approaches to support (DSSIG, 2017a, 2017b). Together, these elements contribute to an emerging professional identity that supports further professionalisation (Cruess et al., 2004; Professional Standards Authority, 2016).

In practice, DSPs demonstrate a high degree of autonomy and complex judgment across diverse contexts, often with limited direct supervision. This includes navigating ethical decision-making, supporting autonomy and informed choice, and responding to complex and intersecting needs related to mental health, behaviour, and social participation. Such responsibilities reflect key characteristics associated with professional roles, including discretion, accountability, and applied expertise (Cruess et al., 2004; Wallin & Young, 2021). Collectively, these structural, educational, and practice-based strengths position the DSP workforce as well suited to further professionalisation through the development of a professional association.

### ***Weaknesses***

The DSP workforce and broader sector include several structural challenges that may inhibit professionalisation. A key limitation is the absence of a unified collective voice and the possibility of competing interests from other similar fields seeking professionalisation. While DSP perspectives may be represented through union negotiations, surveys, or research initiatives, these mechanisms are often fragmented and limited in reach. There is no single, dedicated space for DSPs to engage in sustained dialogue, collective decision-making, or profession-led advocacy. Although the principle of “nothing about us without us” is central to supporting individuals labelled with I/DD, it is less consistently reflected within workforce-level decision-making. This fragmentation may pose challenges for building consensus, mobilizing leadership, and advancing a shared professional identity.

Diversity in educational backgrounds and training pathways further complicates efforts toward professional cohesion. DSPs enter the workforce through a range of programs, including developmental services worker (DSW) diplomas and apprenticeships, as well as social service work, personal support work, child and youth care, and other human services fields. While DSW training is often considered the preferred credential, research suggests that only a minority of the workforce holds this qualification (Hickey, 2019). This variability can make it more difficult to establish standardized expectations, shared identity, and consistent care practices, while also raising concerns about inclusivity during professionalisation efforts. Approaches such as grandfathering, targeted upskilling, and clear communication will be essential to support

cohesion and avoid unintended exclusion of experienced workers with diverse training backgrounds.

Variability in supervision and accountability structures presents an additional challenge. DSPs work across a continuum of settings, including roles with limited or no direct supervision, such as independent support workers. In the absence of consistent oversight or legislated accountability, maintaining connection to professional networks and ensuring adherence to shared standards may be more difficult. At the same time, ongoing workforce instability, including high rates of burnout, turnover, and staffing shortages, may limit engagement in professionalisation initiatives and affect the sustainability of association membership (Ryan et al., 2021; Hickey, 2019, 2024). For example, Hickey (2024) reports that 24.4% of agencies identified turnover and retention challenges as major contributors to vacancies, while an additional 10% cited mental health-related leave.

### ***Opportunities***

International recruitment, provincial policy directions, and ongoing workforce recruitment and retention challenges create a timely opportunity to advance professionalisation efforts. Between 2014 and 2024, increased federal and provincial focus on recruiting international students and workers to address labour shortages has resulted in substantial growth in new Canadians entering the developmental services sector (Community Living Ontario, 2024; Colyar et al, 2023; Statistics Canada, n.d.). In this context, a well-defined and publicly recognized professional identity for DSPs could support workforce integration by providing clarity around role expectations, scope of practice, and pathways for engagement, regardless of prior training or credentials. This may also strengthen recruitment and retention by fostering a clearer sense of belonging and professional identity within the sector.

Provincial policy initiatives further reinforce the need for a skilled and consistent workforce. *Journey to Belonging* (Government of Ontario, 2021) and the Developmental Services Core Competency Framework (Core Competencies, 2022) emphasize person-centred support and highlight the importance of workforce capacity across service contexts, including individualized funding arrangements that rely on independent support workers. Concurrently, government investment in research on workforce recruitment and retention signals recognition of longstanding challenges related to staffing shortages and workforce sustainability (Hickey, 2019, 2024). The designation of DSPs as essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic further underscores their critical role within the broader care system (Bobbette et al., 2020). Together, these policy- and system-level drivers create a favourable context for advancing a professional association.

Emerging regulatory developments, such as the Health and Supportive Care Providers Oversight Authority (HSCPOA; Government of Ontario, 2018), present additional opportunities for alignment. While DSPs are not currently classified as health providers, there is overlap in practice with roles such as Personal Support Workers, including support with activities of daily living, mobility, and medication administration. Alignment with, or parallel development alongside, such regulatory structures may offer increased legitimacy, visibility, and protection for both DSPs and service recipients. However, these opportunities also raise important questions regarding scope of practice, professional autonomy, and the appropriateness of existing regulatory models for DSP work, necessitating sector-wide dialogue.

At the same time, the absence of a dedicated professional association for DSPs increases the risk of absorption into adjacent professions or regulatory structures, potentially resulting in a loss of professional identity. Experiences from related workforces, such as Personal Support Workers, suggest that the development of an association, alongside evolving regulatory mechanisms, can provide a foundation for professional recognition while maintaining role distinction. Any movement toward professionalisation should be grounded in inclusive governance, including representation from DSPs, self-advocates, and family or caregiver stakeholders. Clear, accessible communication regarding the role of the association, including accountability processes and scope of practice, will also be essential to support understanding and engagement across the sector.

### ***Threats***

Financial and structural barriers may limit participation in a professional association, particularly in the absence of employer support. Membership fees and professional development costs may disproportionately affect DSPs, given relatively low wages and existing workforce instability. These barriers may contribute to the uneven engagement and ability of DSP across the sector to participate in professionalisation. Agencies, already facing human resource challenges, may also perceive professionalisation as a threat, particularly if associated with increased costs, wage pressures, or shifts in authority, highlighting the importance of an approach that promotes collaboration across the care ecosystem. There is a risk that agencies may shift responsibility for ongoing professional development onto DSPs without providing financial support, further increasing burden and limiting participation. Strategies such as reduced membership fees, subsidized or low-cost professional development, and sponsorship models may help mitigate these barriers. It also speaks to the need for other professions to support DSPs as they develop their professional identity through joint advocacy and supporting initiatives.

Additional challenges include the potential for role confusion among families, service users, and the broader public, particularly within individualized funding and independent support worker contexts, underscoring the need for clear, accessible education regarding professional roles and expectations. Existing developmental services networks and related professions may also experience concerns about overlap or competition, contributing to fragmentation or “membership fatigue.” There is further risk that DSPs may be absorbed into adjacent regulatory structures, such as the Health and Supportive Care Providers Oversight Authority (Government of Ontario, 2018), potentially resulting in a loss of professional identity. Early and ongoing involvement of DSPs and allies will be essential to maintaining a distinct and representative professional voice.

Finally, the successful development of a professional association will depend on sustained engagement, funding, and the capacity to coordinate. Building interest and participation among DSPs will likely require initial support from workplaces and community networks. Dedicated leadership and seed funding will be critical to advancing early-stage work, including grant development and stakeholder engagement. In the absence of such infrastructure, progress may be limited; however, interim strategies, such as student placements with relevant lived or professional experience, may offer a feasible approach to supporting early organizational development while longer-term resources are secured.

## Conclusion

Professionalisation has the potential to strengthen workforce identity, improve the consistency and quality of support, and enhance recognition of the DSP role. A professional association could provide a platform for advocacy, professional development, and collective engagement. This would be of significant value to the DSP workforce, the individuals they support, and the broader ecosystem of care. By fostering a unified professional identity, it would help clarify the role of DSPs, articulate their distinct competencies, and strengthen recognition of their contributions to the lives and participation of individuals labelled with I/DD. Overall, DSPs meet key criteria for professional status and are well-positioned for further professionalisation.

Establishing a professional association represents a timely and viable strategy to support workforce development and strengthen the developmental services sector in Ontario; however, advancing a professional association for DSPs will require strategic planning, inclusive engagement, and sustained resources. Securing initial funding and coordination capacity is critical to sustaining momentum. Early-stage support, including partnerships or student involvement, may help build an infrastructure while longer-term funding is established. A diverse, DSP-led governance structure - composed of professionals with different roles and backgrounds in the sector - should guide the development of a professional association to ensure it represents the full breadth of the workforce. While collaboration with agencies and government is important, maintaining DSP leadership will support professional autonomy. Finally, engagement with DSPs, self-advocates with I/DD, families, and sector partners, is critical to ensure a holistic framework that ensures relevance and inclusivity for all members of the care ecosystem.



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