

A Common Understanding

OF THE DIRECT SERVICE WORKFORCE CRISIS



Wisconsin Council on Developmental Disabilities
Direct Service Workforce Initiative

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A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF THE DIRECT SERVICE WORKFORCE CRISIS

The purpose of this paper is to summarize our understanding of direct service workforce issues and confirm the approach the Wisconsin Council on Developmental Disabilities intends to take to meet the workforce objectives in its 2002-06 State Plan. This understanding emerges from WCDD's efforts to learn from direct service workers, the agencies that employ them, from people with disabilities who rely on support, their families, and from the county developmental disability programs that finance and administer support services. This paper describes our understanding of the issues and what we think we can do about them.

Our community support system is highly vulnerable due to the increased pressure on counties to serve more people with less money. The risk is higher now because the demand for support exceeds funding. While we can appropriately claim some successes, we recognize that moving people into a system that is already under-funded creates a whole new set of pressures on over-burdened counties and provider agencies. These pressures increase the risk that counties and providers will be pushed to ration, water down, and standardize available services in ways that contradict the Council's long-standing guiding principles as articulated in current and previous state plans. *Especially at a time when the fiscal integrity of our county-based service system is in jeopardy, WCDD's guiding principles should be the foundation that guides our examination of workforce issues and our allocation of time, energy, and money.*

WCDD's mission has been to assure that our state plan is shaped by input from individuals with developmental disabilities and their families and from workers and advocates in the developmental disabilities service system. That input has always defined the values that underlie the Council's work and is integrated into the actions we take to achieve our state plan objectives. For this reason, we outline some of these values to help us understand and guide our discussion of the workforce crisis.

These guiding principles function as goals, touchstones, outcomes and road maps as we implement the State Plan objectives.

Excerpts: WCDD Guiding Principles

Self Determination

...Individuals with developmental disabilities and their families should be the primary decision-makers in the management of their lives...

Opportunity

...Individuals with developmental disabilities and their families have the right to make such essential decisions as where to live, with whom to live, and how and where to spend their time...

Independence and Interdependence

...Independence...is balanced by emphasizing the inter-relationship and interdependence of people with developmental disabilities with...all of us on this planet...

Inclusion

The Council promotes the full inclusion of people with developmental disabilities into their communities. The Council also believes in promoting quality of life and safety by enhancing relationships with friends, families, neighbors and fellow citizens, as these relationships occur in the community.

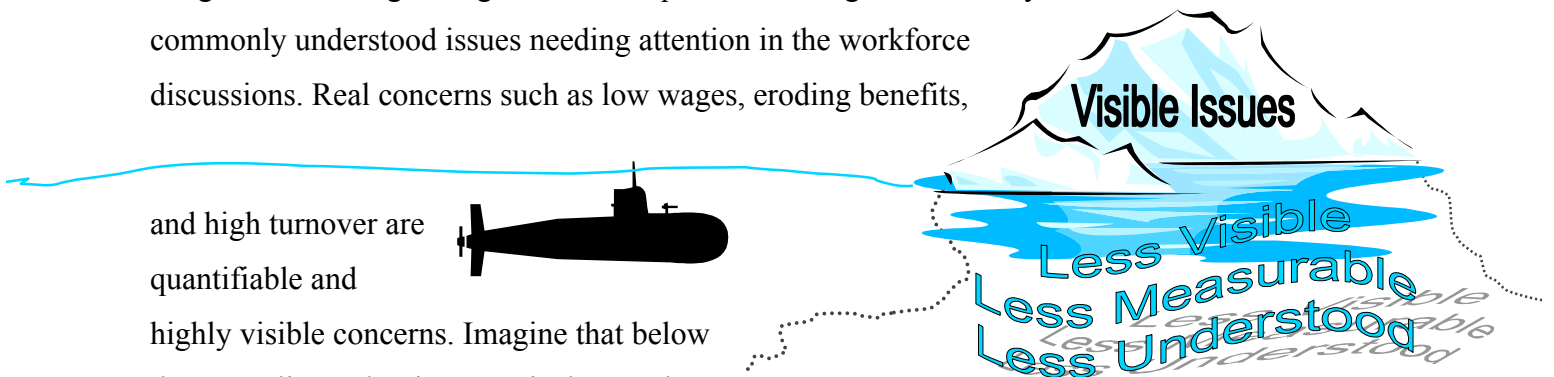
Workforce: So What's the Crisis?

To understand the direct service workforce problem we think it would help to use the image of an iceberg. Imagine that the tip of the iceberg contains only the most visible and most commonly understood issues needing attention in the workforce discussions. Real concerns such as low wages, eroding benefits,

and high turnover are quantifiable and

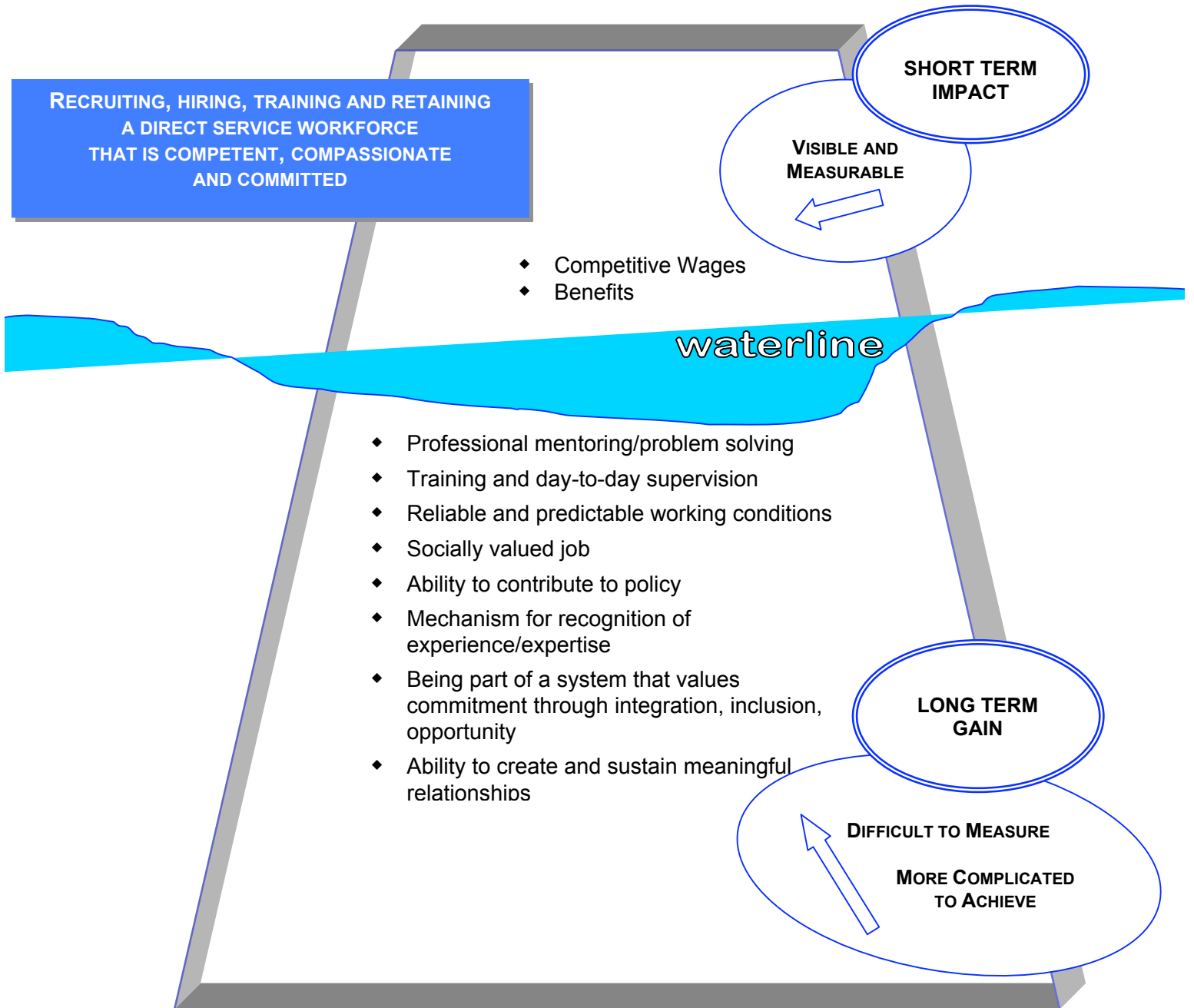
highly visible concerns. Imagine that below the water line, other issues exist but are less

visible. These less visible issues have to do with the low social status accorded people with disabilities and the workforce providing them day to day support. They have to do with the less measurable results of a system starved of adequate funding: less training available to continuing workers, less supervision and mentoring support, less reward and recognition for a job well done, more duties piled on continuing workers as vacant positions remain unfilled. The less visible challenge under the waterline includes the fiscal pressure to resort congregating people in large



groups and standardizing the support available to them. Finally, a less visible impact of the direct service workforce crisis is the undermining of organizational commitment to the values of integration, inclusion, opportunity, and individualized support.

Observe that above and below the water line the iceberg is one solid piece. All of these issues, above and below the waterline, are connected to WCDD's guiding principles.



All of the elements, above and below the water line, are inter-related and essential in securing our overall workforce objectives of recruiting, hiring, training and retaining competent, compassionate and committed staff. How do we achieve these ends? How do we do so while assuring our county and provider systems retain integrity and demonstrate our values as expressed in our guiding principles? How do we do so considering the inconsistency and variation among counties and within counties? How do we accommodate for varying community commitments to the Council's guiding principles and values of integration, inclusion and opportunity? How do we account for the variations in the counties' financial investment in long-term support for persons with developmental disabilities and their families?

When we put these workforce challenges in the context of the Council's guiding principles, we know that the Council wants people present in the community, to have their points of view heard, to be safe, and to be challenged. This can only result if we have a high quality workforce. To achieve this, we must assure that values are preserved, reflected upon and taught. We must engage in activities that lead to outcomes that assure that workforce-related training is relevant, focuses on advancing organizational problem-solving competencies, and increases interpersonal skills and personal growth. We need the image of our workforce from within and without to be one that is highly valued, supported and financially rewarded.

Our study of the direct service workforce crisis confirms that improving wages and benefits is a necessity. But it isn't the only solution to aim for. To address both the highly visible and the less visible challenges to our direct service workforce, the following outcomes are most critical for achieving a sustainable workforce:

1. **A job that is compensated fairly and adequately** (wages are competitive and reflect job importance; benefits are competitive and comprehensive);
2. **A job that is do-able** (training is provided; supervision and support are available for problem solving; the working conditions are safe and predictable);
3. **A job that is meaningful** (society values this work and attributes status to direct service workers; workers find value in their relationships with co-workers and with the people who rely on their support).

Without all three outcomes, the system is not sustainable and long-term goals will remain elusive. For this reason, our approach to workforce improvement cannot be one that addresses any single outcome to the detriment of another. We must approach the iceberg as a whole, looking at the tip and also at everything under the water line.

While it is likely we could initially recruit direct service workers if our system offered more adequate compensation and better working conditions, it is almost certain *we will not retain employees unless their jobs are meaningful*. It would be relatively easy to address quantitative problems such as wage increases and waiting lists with a simple, targeted funding initiative. However, we must be ambitious and demonstrate leadership in finding solutions that also address the problems of shoring up and sustaining the county-based system we value.

Voices Heard—Lessons Learned

Our first year and a half of work with people who have direct experience with the workforce crisis have pointed us toward specific recommendations. Guided by the process that built the WCDD state plan, we have engaged a wide range of input. These **stakeholders** eloquently described our current dilemma: although we are committed to our principles of choice and individualized support, we face enormous political and fiscal pressures to compromise and reduce our support for people with developmental disabilities. We are faced with these choices.

1. We can withdraw from the dilemma, go through the motions, and deny the tensions exist.
2. We can shrink our values to fit inside what the current political and fiscal constraints seem to allow.
3. Or we can recognize and work inside the tension to develop our capacity to sustain and support what we value.

STAKEHOLDERS:

- Consumers
- Families
- Providers agencies
- Direct service workers/caregivers
- Advocates
- Network colleagues
- County and local government administrators, case managers, & other decision makers

Our stakeholders' input and partnership helped us formulate the following commitments.

- WCDD will rely on its guiding principles promoting individualized and comprehensive support to resist the temptation to tolerate serving more people with fewer hours of care than people with disabilities and their allies determine are needed.
- We will make it clear that we accept only those supportive living and working arrangements for people with disabilities that meet the criteria set by WCDD's guiding principles.
- We will consciously sustain our advocacy for and commitment to individualized supports in small settings integrated into the community.
- We will be attentive to pointing out the risks when there are temptations to support limits on quality and individualization of services in order to serve more people.

These are not new insights or expectations. However, a renewed vigilance is required, especially now when we are in the midst of increased demand for community support services in a climate of scarce resources. With this in mind, our workforce goals seek these outcomes:

1. **A job that is compensated fairly and adequately.** We support an increase in Medicaid waiver program daily rates for people currently served in the CIP programs, brain injury waiver, and CSLA waiver. This is one step toward securing the foundation of our county developmental disabilities service system. This strategy strengthens the local system's financial capacity so workers can have jobs that provide adequate wages and benefits. When workers have an incentive to stay committed to direct service work, people who rely on services have greater continuity and better quality support.
2. **A job that is do-able.** We will organize training and technical assistance opportunities relevant to direct service workers and their employers that focus on advancing organizational problem-solving competencies, improving models of supervision and recognition, and increasing interpersonal skills and personal growth.
3. **A job that is meaningful.** We will create an image of our workforce--within our organizations and throughout our communities--that establishes the value of the profession, so that direct service workers will be respected, well supported, and financially rewarded.