



Missouri Direct Service Worker Advisory Panel Final Project Report

Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services
In Partnership with ADvancing States



Executive Summary

The Missouri Direct Service Worker (DSW) Advisory Panel was established to capture and elevate the voices and experiences of frontline service workers who provide essential support for older adults and people with disabilities. The advisory panel provided DSWs with a platform to share their knowledge and offer recommendations to improve wages, recruitment, training, retention, and professional recognition within Missouri's long-term services and supports (LTSS) workforce.

Over the course of the project, the DSW advisory panel members actively participated in thirteen meetings and responded to surveys that explored key issues to help inform Missouri's workforce initiatives and strengthen the state's LTSS system. The advisory panel provided input on workers compensation, training systems, recruitment, workplace supports, and career development. Workers also highlighted the value of mentorship, professional development opportunities, and greater recognition of direct service work as a skilled and essential profession.

Project Background and Purpose

Direct service workers play a critical role in supporting older adults and people with disabilities to live safely and independently in their homes and communities. Despite the importance of this workforce, states across the country continue to face significant challenges recruiting and retaining workers in these roles.

To better understand the needs of Missouri’s direct service workforce, the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) contracted with ADvancing States to establish the DSW Advisory Panel.

The panel was designed to:

- Capture the knowledge and expertise of DSWs
- Gather insight into the lived experiences of the workforce
- Identify recruitment and retention barriers
- Provide feedback on workforce initiatives such as training systems and workforce data efforts
- Identify areas for improvement and gather ideas to strengthen the DSW workforce
- Inform future policy and program development

The advisory panel served as a non-voting body composed of active DSWs who provide services in a variety of LTSS settings.

Advisory Panel Structure and Participation

The advisory panel included at its highest number fifteen DSWs representing diverse geographic areas, tenure, service settings, and populations served across Missouri. Members brought experience from a range of care environments including:

- In-home care
- Assisted living and residential care facilities
- Agency model and consumer-directed services programs
- Programs serving older adults and people with intellectual and developmental disabilities

Over the course of the project (March 2024-February 2026), panel members participated in recurring virtual meetings, surveys, and structured discussions. Two in-person meetings were held, one at the 2024 launch of the panel that laid groundwork for the following two years of

work and the intention of the advisory panel and one for the 2026 wrap up that reviewed the panel’s work and discussed future DHSS workforce initiatives.

Through these meetings, the panel provided input on key workforce issues including recruitment strategies, training needs, workforce supports, wages and benefits, and system improvements.

Workforce Insights from Direct Service Workers

Panel members provided valuable insight into the daily realities of direct service work. Workers described their roles as multifaceted, requiring a wide range of responsibilities beyond basic personal care.

Standard responsibilities include:

- Assisting with activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing, and meal preparation
- Providing companionship and emotional support
- Transporting clients to appointments and community activities
- Completing documentation and care notes
- Coordinating with families, supervisors, and other providers



***“Adaptability and flexibility
are crucial to the direct care
worker’s success.”***

*— DSW Advisory Panel
Member*

DSWs reported that much of their workday is spent providing direct services for clients, while the remainder of their time is spent commuting, completing documentation, and coordinating services.

Despite the challenges of the role, DSWs consistently emphasized that the work is deeply meaningful. Many DSWs described strong personal connections with the people they support and highlighted the importance of helping people maintain independence and dignity.

Motivations for Entering the Field

Panel meetings and results from an online survey revealed several reasons workers enter the direct service profession. Many DSWs reported being drawn to the field because of:

- A passion for helping others
- Personal or family experiences with caregiving
- A desire for meaningful work that makes a difference in people's lives

"The reason I stay in this work is the people—they're what make the biggest impact."

— DSW Advisory Panel Member

DSWs often described their role as both a profession and a calling. The relationships formed with the people they support were frequently cited as one of the most rewarding aspects of the job.

Challenges Facing the Workforce

While the work is rewarding, panel members also discussed several challenges that affect the direct service workforce. Common challenges include:

- Staffing shortages that increase the workload for existing staff
- Wages not comparable to the physical and emotional demands of the job
- Inconsistent benefits depending on the employer or service model
- Communication gaps and incomplete care plans
- Loneliness and isolation that both the client and DSW experience
- Administrative and documentation burdens
- Transportation challenges when traveling between clients

DSWs also described the emotional demands of caregiving and the difficulty of balancing work responsibilities with personal and family life. These challenges highlight the need for continued investment in workforce supports and policies that strengthen recruitment and retention.

DSW INSIGHT: PANEL MEMBERS NOTED GAPS IN COMMUNICATION AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION, INCLUDING INCOMPLETE CARE PLANS AND LIMITED KNOWLEDGE ABOUT CLIENT NEEDS PRIOR TO VISITS. DSWs EMPHASIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF CLEAR, CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION AND PERSON-CENTERED CARE PLANS TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE SERVICE DELIVERY AND REDUCE STRESS.

Recruitment Insights

Recruitment of new DSWs was a major topic of discussion throughout the advisory panel work. Panel members emphasized that recruitment strategies are most effective when they reflect the real experiences of workers and the meaningful nature of the job. DSWs expressed strong support for recruitment campaigns that feature real DSWs and the people they support.

The panel identified several recruitment strategies that could be used including:

- Local outreach through community-based organizations, churches, and health facilities
- Use of social media platforms to reach younger audiences
- Recruitment messaging that highlights the personal rewards of direct service work
- Honest job previews that accurately reflect job responsibilities

Panel members also recommended introducing caregiving careers earlier through partnerships with high schools, volunteer opportunities, and training programs that expose younger people to the profession.

DSW INSIGHT: PANEL MEMBERS EMPHASIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF REALISTIC JOB PREVIEWS, NOTING THAT SOME POSITIONS APPEAR APPEALING DURING RECRUITMENT BUT DO NOT REFLECT ACTUAL JOB DEMANDS. DSWs RECOMMENDED OFFERING JOB SHADOWING OPPORTUNITIES SO PROSPECTIVE HIRES BETTER UNDERSTAND THE ROLE BEFORE ACCEPTING A POSITION.

Training and Professional Development

Training was another key focus of the advisory panel's discussions. DSWs expressed strong support for training opportunities that are accessible, build practical skills, and inspire career growth. Panel members emphasized the importance of trainings that reflect real-world caregiving situations and prepares workers for the complexities of supporting people with diverse needs.

Suggested training topics included:

- Trauma-informed care
- Behavioral health issues

- De-escalation techniques
- Autism
- Nutrition and dietary considerations
- Person-centered care practices
- Communication and relationship-building

“Having a record of completed trainings would help workers show their experience and build a career.”
— DSW Advisory Panel Member

Panel members advocated for the development of a statewide Learning Management System (LMS) that can provide centralized access to training resources and allow DSWs to maintain portable records of completed training.

Workforce Supports and Retention Strategies

Panel discussions highlighted several strategies that could help retain DSWs and improve job satisfaction. Members emphasized the importance of a supportive workplace that provides clear communication, opportunities for professional development, and recognition of the value of direct service work.

Acknowledging that wage increases are not always possible, members provided other retention strategies that include:

- Expanding access to affordable health insurance and benefits
- Providing mileage reimbursement or transportation supports
- Offering flexible scheduling options
- Providing opportunities for peer mentorship and support

Mentorship programs were viewed as particularly valuable for supporting new workers. In this model, qualified DSWs can share their expertise, provide guidance, answer questions, and help new workers navigate challenging situations.

DSW INSIGHT: PANEL MEMBERS NOTED THAT IN MANY SETTINGS INFORMAL MENTORSHIP ALREADY OCCURS, WITH EXPERIENCED WORKERS FREQUENTLY SUPPORTING NEW HIRES. HOWEVER, THIS SUPPORT IS NOT CONSISTENTLY STRUCTURED OR RECOGNIZED. DSWs EMPHASIZED THE VALUE OF HAVING A DESIGNATED MENTOR TO ANSWER QUESTIONS AND PROVIDE GUIDANCE DURING THE EARLY STAGES OF EMPLOYMENT.

Workforce Data and Rate Study Input

The advisory panel also provided critical, experience-based insights to Missouri’s workforce data efforts and rate study planning. Panel members described workdays that extend beyond direct service delivery, with significant time spent on non-billable activities. While most workers reported that the majority of their time is spent providing direct care, they emphasized that additional responsibilities are often required but not consistently compensated.

Examples of non-billable or inconsistently compensated time include:

- Travel between client homes
- Documentation and reporting requirements
- Required trainings and orientations
- Communication with supervisors and care teams

Some workers reported being compensated for travel and training time, while others—particularly those in self-directed models—reported only being paid for time spent directly with clients. These inconsistencies contribute to variability in effective hourly wages and impacts job satisfaction.

These discussions provided DHSS with valuable context for understanding how workforce policies and reimbursement structures affect frontline DSWs.

DSW INSIGHT: PANEL MEMBERS HIGHLIGHTED THE BURDEN OF UNPAID WORK, INCLUDING COMPLETING DOCUMENTATION OUTSIDE OF SCHEDULED HOURS AND PARTICIPATING IN UNPAID TRAINING. DSWs EMPHASIZED THAT THESE TASKS ARE ESSENTIAL TO THEIR ROLE BUT ARE NOT CONSISTENTLY COMPENSATED, IMPACTING OVERALL JOB SATISFACTION.

Direct Service Worker Symposium

Advisory panel members also discussed the potential value of a statewide Direct Service Worker Symposium. DSWs expressed interest in an event that would bring together workers from across Missouri to participate in training sessions, share experiences, and build professional connections.

A survey was distributed to panel members and DSWs across the states to gather their preferences on symposium formats (e.g., virtual, in person), the length and time of day for a

symposium, and training topics. From the 108 submissions received, the preferred formats included short in-person training sessions, breakout discussions, and opportunities for peer networking. Panel members also noted that accessibility, travel distance, and scheduling would be important considerations when planning future events. Symposium session topics elicited robust responses from the people completing the survey with the highest ranked training topics being:

- Administrative (e.g., paperwork, guidelines, technical support)
- Interpersonal trainings (e.g., establishing boundaries, communication skills)
- Emergency Preparedness (e.g., fall prevention)
- Activities of Daily Living (e.g., homemaking, personal care, cooking)
- Person-centered care
- Trauma Informed care
- Dietary / nutrition

Key Themes and Lessons Learned

Several consistent themes emerged from across all advisory panel meetings and discussions.

- Direct service work is deeply meaningful and impactful. Workers take pride in helping the people they support maintain their independence and dignity.
- Workforce recruitment and retention require continued investment. Wages, benefits, and workplace supports play a critical role in attracting and retaining workers.
- Training and career pathways are essential for strengthening the profession. Accessible training systems and opportunities for professional development can improve workforce stability and job satisfaction.
- DSW voices must remain central to workforce policy discussions. The advisory panel demonstrated the value of engaging frontline workers directly in program development and decision-making.

Recommendations and Opportunities

Based on the insights shared by advisory panel members, several opportunities exist for DHSS to strengthen its direct service workforce. These recommendations build on the experiences shared by panel members and provide actionable strategies to support recruitment, training, retention, and professional development. Implementing these strategies will require continued collaboration between state agencies, providers, workforce partners, and DSWs.

1. Develop a Comprehensive Direct Service Workforce Statewide Plan

DHSS could develop and implement a comprehensive statewide DSW Plan to strengthen recruitment, training, retention, and professional recognition of workers who support older adults and people with disabilities in home and community-based settings.

Building on insights from the DSW Advisory Panel, the statewide plan could establish a coordinated framework that aligns workforce policies, investments, and partnerships across state agencies, providers, workforce development partners, and DSWs themselves.

A comprehensive statewide plan would position DHSS to address workforce shortages, improve job quality, and strengthen the long-term sustainability of its LTSS system. The plan could function as a strategic roadmap for enhancing supports for DSWs and be regularly updated to track progress toward identified goals.

In recent years, meaningful steps have been taken toward this type of strategic approach. The Department of Mental Health (DMH), in collaboration with DHSS, released two studies designed to better understand Missouri's direct service career landscape. The 2023 Workforce and Economic Research for Careers Study provided an environmental scan of Missouri's HCBS direct care career pathways and highlighted relevant national practices. The 2025 Long-Term Care Career Pathway Development Study analyzed training curricula across direct care roles and identified potential training equivalencies that could improve cross-sector career mobility.

Additionally, Missouri's Rural Health Transformation Program includes a focus on early healthcare workforce career pathways and DHSS is encouraging the inclusion of the Direct Service Workforce as a pathway. Although still in early development, this interagency group may offer additional opportunities to strengthen and support the DSWs.

The following recommendations and topics could stand alone or be considered part of the comprehensive plan.

2. Develop and Implement a Comprehensive Workforce Recruitment Strategy

Panel members emphasized that recruitment efforts must better communicate the value, purpose, and realities of direct service work. Developing coordinated recruitment strategies could help elevate the awareness and professionalism of the direct service workforce.

DHSS is currently exploring the development of a comprehensive education and recruitment webpage for all Long-Term Services and Supports (LTSS) direct care career paths. This collaborative initiative aims to offer a single, easy-to-navigate resource that highlights the full range of direct care opportunities across both facility-based and home- and community-based settings. The webpage will provide clear, user-friendly information on:

- The variety of LTSS work environments and how the unique nature of each environment may align with personal strengths, career interests, and lifestyle needs
- Education and training requirements for various direct care roles, including how to prepare for entry into the LTSS workforce
- The benefits, opportunities, and flexibility offered within LTSS careers such as flexible scheduling and mission driven work
- Career pathways within the LTSS workforce to help individuals envision long-term advancement opportunities

Panel members also highlighted key recruitment strategies that providers should consider adopting, including:

- Authentic storytelling campaigns featuring real DSWs and the people they support
- Community-based outreach through local partner organizations (e.g., faith-based entities, schools, healthcare, providers)
- Partnerships with workforce development programs and community colleges.
- Targeted outreach strategies that meet potential workers where they are—for example, using social media and digital tools to engage younger adults, and leveraging local community centers to reach older adults
- Job shadowing or job previewing prior to hire to ensure understanding of expectations

3. Expand Workforce Training and Professional Development Opportunities

The DSW advisory panel expressed strong support for accessible training that reflects real-world caregiving situations and supports skill development over time. Discussions focused not only on the importance of a standardized foundational training model but also on the need for ongoing learning opportunities that enhance quality of care and create meaningful career advancement pathways.

DHSS is collaborating with providers to develop a Learning Management System (LMS). The first stage of development will focus on Agency Model training opportunities with further exploration to other service types in later development stages. The LMS aims to:

- **Ensure Quality & Safety:** A consistent, competency-based training framework equips DSWs with essential skills that reduce errors and improve outcomes for participants
- **Strengthen Workforce Stability:** Standardized training builds the DSWs confidence and preparedness, helping reduce turnover driven by feelings of being overwhelmed or unsupported
- **Expand Career Mobility:** Portable, universally recognized credentials allow DSWs to move between employers and settings without repeating training, increasing workforce flexibility
- **Support Career Advancement:** A unified training model provides a strong foundation onto which specialized or advanced training can be layered, offering clear pathways for professional growth and recognition

4. Explore Peer Mentorship and Career Pathway Programs

Panel members consistently highlighted the importance of peer support in helping new workers succeed in the profession.

Peer mentorship programs could provide structured support for new workers during their first year of employment. Experienced workers could serve as mentors, offering guidance, answering questions, and helping new workers navigate challenges.

Providers could consider the following approaches:

- Establish informal mentorship pairings between new and experienced staff

- Identify seasoned workers who can serve as designated “go-to” supports for new hires
- Acknowledge mentorship contributions through non-monetary recognition such as titles or public acknowledgment

In addition, Missouri could explore developing clearer career pathways for DSWs through a tiered payment structure. Career pathways can help improve retention by demonstrating opportunities for advancement and professional growth.

Examples of potential pathway options include:

- Entry-level DSW roles
- Advanced service worker or specialist certifications
- Lead worker or mentor roles

5. Strengthen Workforce Supports and Retention Strategies

DSWs identified several supports that could improve job satisfaction and retention within the workforce including:

- Increasing access to benefits such as health insurance, paid time off, and retirement plans
- Supporting transportation solutions such as mileage reimbursement or travel stipends
- Encouraging flexible scheduling models that allow DSWs to balance caregiving responsibilities and personal needs
- Improve schedule predictability and communication (e.g., advance scheduling, minimizing last-minute changes)
- Expanding access to mental health and wellness supports for caregivers
- Recognizing and supporting staff through regular feedback and acknowledgment
- Evaluating internal practices related to non-billable work and workload expectations

6. Continue Worker Engagement and Workforce Feedback Mechanisms

One of the most successful elements of the advisory panel initiative was the opportunity for workers to share their experiences directly with state leaders. Maintaining ongoing engagement with DSWs can help ensure that workforce initiatives reflect real needs and challenges in the field.

Future engagement strategies could include:

- Continuing the Direct Service Worker Advisory Panel
- Conducting periodic workforce surveys
- Creating feedback channels where workers can share experiences and recommendations (such as a dedicated email account)
- Hosting listening sessions with workers and providers

Regular, structured engagement with DSWs will help ensure that policies and programs remain responsive, relevant, and effective. DHSS is actively exploring opportunities to maintain these connections.

7. Explore Opportunities for a Statewide Direct Service Worker Summit

Panel members expressed strong interest in convening a statewide event focused on training, networking, and professional development.

A Direct Service Worker Summit could provide opportunities for:

- Skill-building workshops and training sessions
- Peer networking and community building
- Recognition of outstanding caregivers
- Discussion of workforce issues and innovations

Such an event could also strengthen connections between workers, providers, state agencies, and workforce partners.

DHSS is exploring potential avenues to support this type of event. While the vision is highly valuable, it will require careful consideration of cost and logistics. Successful implementation would likely depend on partnerships with larger initiatives—such as rural health transformation efforts—and strong engagement from provider agencies.

DHSS is also examining on demand options that could achieve many of the same goals through future stages of the LMS, offering greater accessibility and flexibility for workers across the state.

Conclusion

Direct service workers are a foundational aspect of Missouri's LTSS system. Their work allows thousands of older adults and people with disabilities to live safely and independently in their homes and communities.

The Missouri Direct Service Worker Advisory Panel created an important opportunity for DSWs to share their experiences and help shape the future of the workforce. The insights gathered through this initiative will support ongoing efforts to improve recruitment, training, retention, and professional recognition of this essential workforce.

Continued collaboration between workers, providers, and state leaders will be critical to building a strong and sustainable direct service workforce for Missouri.

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