

DELAWARE

R e s e a r c h B r i e f I s s u e # 1

Welcome to the first issue of *delAWARE: A Research Brief*. As a University Center for Excellence in Disabilities Research, Education, and Services, part of our mission is to bring information about research and best practices to the community. We have been distributing our newsletter, *delAWARE*, for more than five years in that effort. While the newsletter highlights services and supports in Delaware itself, this new publication called *delAWARE: A Research Brief*, will highlight current research efforts related to supporting individuals with disabilities in the community, so that community practitioners have easy access to information they need.

Like many states, Delaware is assisting adults with developmental disabilities to make choices about where to live. Along with this increasing emphasis on choice, the recent *Olmstead* decision is leading the way for adults to leave the state institution to live in the community, and aging parents are increasingly turning to the state to provide a home for their adult son or daughter. In market terms, demand for community living options and staff are up.

Whatever the choice for living in the community may be, the success of a person's life in the community and more importantly, his or her safety, depends on a wide variety of factors. One of those factors—perhaps the most critical one—is the quality and consistency of the folks who provide that daily support. Never a high paying field, the current entry level salaries of \$7 - \$10/hour are not a living wage, nor can they compare with major employers competing for the same work force. Combine this low employment rate with low pay and a smaller work force, and hiring and retaining qualified, competent staff becomes a challenge. The question becomes *How can we deliver high quality, person-centered supports in this environment?*

This first issue of *delAWARE: A Research Brief* looks at the research related to staff hiring, retention, and training done across the country over the past 10 years. It is geared to bring information about successful practices to community providers, funding agencies, and family members. While we must continue to push for higher wages to attract high quality staff, they must be offered in conjunction with education, appropriate recruitment efforts, and management practice.

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Turnover of Direct Support Professionals

Marie Ann Aghazadian has a son with autism. As director of the Parent Information Center of Delaware, Marie Anne works with families across the state, and is a strong advocate for the rights of individuals with disabilities. A major problem she faces is staff turnover among people who support her son, Stefan. Marie Ann sees the two major reasons for turnover as the very low salary paid to support professionals and their lack of skills.

Like all parents, Marie Ann wants her son to be supported by people who know him well, understand his needs, and help him learn skills needed to live the life he wants. From a parent's perspective, it is easy to see why staff turnover and a lack of training are important concerns. Turnover leaves a huge void in the quality of support needed by individuals with disabilities. The purpose of this research brief is to look closer at what research says are reasons for turnover and what can be done about it.

According to research, there are essentially eight reasons why staff leave their positions:

Low Wages

The average beginning wage generally ranges from \$6-\$8 per hour (roughly \$1,320 per month full time). For many workers these wages do not reflect their education (most staff have college experience which is beyond the high school diploma/GED requirement), their level of responsibility, or the type of duties they must perform. This is more evident as positions have evolved from keeping people clean and safe to teaching skills supporting choice. While there are intrinsic rewards, the need of workers to earn a respectable living is important. Without increasing both salaries and opportunities for career advancement, disability services will continue to have high turnover rates (Braddock and Mitchell, 1992).

Inadequate Benefits

Surveys conducted on employee satisfaction show that benefits are an important part of the decision to stay at a position (Razza, 1993). Razza (1993) found that many employees rate the desire for better benefits over higher salary. Employees without needed health insurance and other benefits are more likely to leave (Mitchell and Braddock, 1994). The nonprofit world has been unable to offer comparable benefit packages to those offered by the government or business community. This is aggravated by many agencies using part-time staff so they will not have to offer benefits. Agencies need to offer a full benefits package to reduce turnover.

Problems Caused by High Turnover Rates

The problems associated with high turnover rates are mostly felt by the consumers. These problems significantly affect the improvements parents and families would like to see. There are four major problems caused by high staff turnover.

Inadequate Care

Consistently, individuals with disabilities learn more skills and are generally happier when the same people care for them over an extended period of time (Razza, 1993). High turnover rates make this difficult in many direct support settings and are a major concern for parents and relatives of individuals with disabilities.

Increased Cost to Provider Agencies

High turnover requires provider agencies to spend more on recruiting and training new employees compared to the costs of paying long-term employees. The problem is likely to increase due to the probable effects of the Olmstead decision in Delaware. Providers are extremely concerned that the increased growth due to Olmstead will stretch their already thin resources to the limit (Terry Olson, Martin Luther Homes of Delaware).

Lack of Cohesion Between Employees

High turnover rates make it difficult for employees to establish positive working relationships with one another. Working as an isolated unit can lead to burnout and dissatisfaction in the working environment (West, 1998). Studies have shown that consumers receive better care when employees work as a team and take an important role in the support for consumers (Alpha Group, 1990).

Staff Shortages

Staff shortages are common in direct support settings. The employees who stay are often required to handle the work normally assigned to two or more employees. The increased workload creates the onset of burnout, possibly causing even long-term employees to leave, thus increasing work for new employees and creating a circular problem. In today's tight labor market, it is almost impossible to stay fully staffed.

Lack of Career Advancement

There is frequently a lack of opportunity for promotion in provider agencies. Turnover will remain high with the continuation of low wages, poor benefits, and no career advancement. Agencies need to offer a clear career track with opportunities for promotion (Larson, Lakin, Bruininks, and Braddock, 1998).

Lack of Union Representation

A study by Mitchell and Braddock (1994) shows that the conditions cited above offer fertile ground for union development. They found that staff stated union membership would make them more likely to stay, based on their assumption that the union usually means higher wages and better representation. Unfortunately, the high turnover rates make it difficult for a union to organize.

Poor Relationships with Management

In general, people tend to stay in jobs in which they have a good working relationship with management (Razza, 1993). Workers feel valued when management seriously considers their ideas, feelings, and suggestions. They will continue to work when other factors such as wages and benefits are not in place.

Poor Understanding of the Job

Workers who clearly understand the position before being hired remain on the job longer (Wanous, 1992). Studies by Scheirs, Giffort, and Furtkamp (1980) and Zaharia and Baumeister (1981) found that retention rates were highest for workers who were rehired (they had been on that job before), referred by a coworker friend who presumably talked about their job, or had applied as a "walk-in" because of their personal interest or curiosity. Retention is lower for those hired through newspaper advertising or an employment agency. With low unemployment there are few opportunities to be selective due to the need to fill positions. This demonstrates the need for making certain that applicants fully understand their duties prior to being offered the job.

Lack of Proper Training

New employee orientation and training have a positive effect on staff retention (West, 1998). Often, new hires receive the minimum needed to work independently and have no concept of the "big picture" of their organization or what the job entails. Their lack of knowledge and training about consumers and their needs hinders their ability to offer appropriate supports and services. The confusion over the job requirements and lack of necessary skills often leads to either quitting or being fired.

Poor Working Environment

Supporting individuals with disabilities can be a stress filled job. Job satisfaction is a major determinant of staff retention. According to Razza (1993), there are four contributing factors to job satisfaction: agreement of jobs with personal goals and values, burnout, satisfaction with supervision, and employment history.

Recommendations for Better Staff Recruitment and Retention

Studies have consistently shown that the use of sound recruitment strategies is an important aspect of reducing turnover (Larson and Guillary, 1993; Wanous, 1992). Recruitment provides employers an opportunity to screen potential employees who are likely to leave soon after being hired. There are several recruitment recommendations that would give employers more discretion over the applicants they hire.

Realistic Information

Provide applicants with realistic information about what types of duties they will be required to perform and what kinds of stress they will encounter. One simple way of doing this is providing applicants with printed materials describing a realistic picture of their typical duties and situations they can expect to see (Larson and Guillary, 1993).

Structured Interviews

Conduct structured interviews in which applicants are measured against a standard to determine if they are going to be an effective, dependable support provider. All applicants are asked the same set of questions so their responses can be compared and the best person hired for the job.

Role-Playing Scenarios

Use fictional situations during interviews which represent real situations applicants will face if hired. This gives an employer the ability to evaluate the thoughts and actions of each applicant (Larson, et al., 1998).

Financial Incentives

Offer incentives such as pay raises, bonuses, and position changes for employees who gain a certain amount of tenure. Employees will stay longer if they feel they have a chance to increase their pay or receive a promotion.

Benefits

Offer benefits including pro-rated leave, flexible paid leave, and a periodic review of benefits for changes and adaptations to be made. Provider agencies need to offer a benefits package that makes employees feel they are properly compensated for their work (Larson, Lakin, Bruninks, Braddock, 1998).

Educational benefits and incentives.

Provide support for employees who would like to further their educational level in order to make advances in the field. Offer assistance in paying for education and/or flexibility in schedule. Offer bonuses and promotions for increased skill level and knowledge base due to increased education levels.



Relationship Between Effective Training and Turnover

Training is often considered the key element in retaining staff over a period of time (Alpha Group, 1990). Larson, et. al (1998) found that the more hours an employee trained, the longer they stay. Training not only decreases staff turnover, it also improves the support given to individuals with disabilities. Thoroughly trained staff know and understand their specific duties and can better support consumers. There are several suggestions for improving training practices.

Increase Training Time

More training time completed by employees has been shown to decrease turnover rates. Many studies have suggested that training should be made the primary focus of direct care facilities (Lakin, et. al, 1998; Alpha Group, 1990; Wanous, 1992).

Direct care programs should go beyond the amount of training required by state mandates (Lakin, et. al, 1998). Often, these mandates do not require a sufficient amount of training to ensure that employees remain longer.

Stress Management

Teach new employees how to deal with the stress that they will be experiencing. Many programs may downplay the amount of stress this career can produce, leading to burnout which has consistently been a factor in turnover rates. (Lawson and O'Brien, 1994).

Peer Mentoring

Studies show that new employees are less likely to leave when they are trained by someone who has substantial experience (West, 1998). Also, when new employees receive support and assurance from a mentor, they are more comfortable and confident and, in turn, they stay longer.

Good Supervision

Supervisors need to provide support and assurance to new employees so they do not feel isolated (West, 1998). Supervisors with good managerial and personal skills are vital to keeping staff. It is also important that managers and employees communicate openly about duties, stress, and employee interactions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research confirms what Marie-Ann Aghazadian sees as reasons for high staff turnover in programs across Delaware. Higher wages, more training, creative and supportive supervision, stress management, and a clear picture of position all contribute to staff retention and high quality services and supports.

Something that Marie-Ann knows, and we concur, is that if agencies continue on the same course, individuals with disabilities will be the ones to suffer the consequences. Advocates must continue to push for adequate funding levels, high quality management, creative programming, and person centered approaches in order to assure that citizens with disabilities have lives with opportunity and growth.

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