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Wyoming Demonstrates Major Improvements in Retention by Enhancing Wages and Training

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Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) in Wyoming provide guidance and support to more than 1,800 individuals with physical, psychiatric and cognitive disabilities and other support needs. Wyoming, like other states, is a challenged to keep DSPs in the field. In the 1990s this challenge was exacerbated by Wyoming's unenviable position of being ranked as 50th in the nation with regard to average and average starting wages of DSPs. (Braddock & Mitchell, 1992).

In 2002 the Wyoming legislature targeted a 28% increase in funding for Medicaid Home and Community-Based Services program for adults with developmental disabilities (and other programs supporting people with mental, physical and health conditions). This increase in funding was specifically targeted to DSP compensation for the purpose of improving retention. The 28% increase in 2002 was followed with 3% increases in 2003 and 2004. With the appropriations, Wyoming's DSP wages were brought from 50th in the nation to above the national average. After the legislature made these changes Wyoming average wage rates for DSPs averaged $9.96 per hour as compared with $8.68 nationally, estimated from 37 state studies reviewed by Polister, Lakin & Prouty (2003).

Concurrent to the appropriation, a compensation study was commissioned to assess the impact of this intervention. It was conducted by the University of Wyoming, Wyoming Institute for Disabilities (WIND), and directed by Ken Heinlein. Figures 1 – 4, illustrate the wage changes for DSPs as a result of the action of the legislature in Wyoming and the associated effects of those wage changes.

Following the decisive commitment of the state legislature, as shown in Figure 1, beginning minimum wages of DSPs increased from $5.15 in 2001 to 7.50, slightly above the national average of $7.33 (Polister, Lakin & Prouty 2003). Between 2001 and 2004 the expenditures for full compensation (wages and benefits) for full-time DSPs increased from $9.03 to $13.19 (Figure 2); and wages for DSPs with at least 12 months experience increased from $7.31 to $10.74 (Figure 3). Associated with these notable improvements in compensation, the average annual turnover rate in Wyoming decreased from 52% in 2001 to 35% in 2003, to 32% in 2004 (Figure 4).

Reimbursement and Retention of Wyoming Adult DD Direct Service Professionals

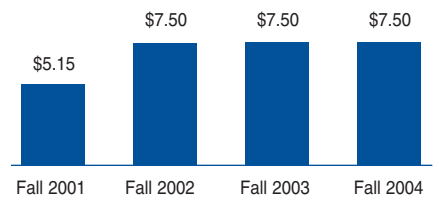

Figure 1 Wyoming DD Adult Program Staff Minimum Beginning Wage

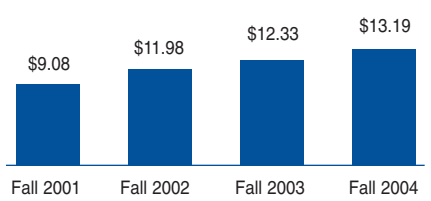

Figure 2 Wyoming DD Adult Program Full-Time Staff Total Compensation

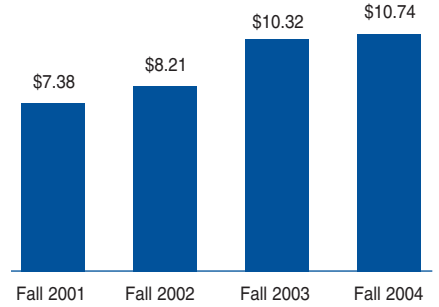

Figure 3 Wyoming DD Adult Program Average DSP Wage After 12 Months Experience

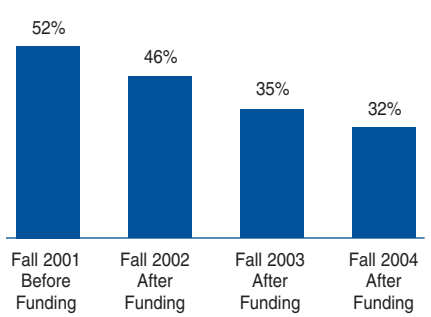

Figure 4 Wyoming DD Adult Program Full Time Staff Turnover Rate

Ongoing Training, Development and Recognition

The nearly 40% reduction in staff turnover cannot be absolutely tied to increased compensation. Wyoming also made a significant commitment to DSP training and career development. Wyoming is one of the first states to have a Direct Support Specialist National Apprenticeship program approved by the Department of Labor. The Ark Regional Services program in Laramie was one of the first apprenticeship sites in 2004. That

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program was based upon Ark's competency-based method of preparing DSPs through direct work experience and training with experienced professionals. Wyoming's Department of Workforce Services Director Kathy Emmons has called the apprenticeship program "an excellent way to build a targeted workforce to meet the needs of employers and consumers across the state of Wyoming." Wyoming's Gov. Dave Freudenthal has observed, "This program…effectively creates a career path for people to follow as direct support staff…This is a long-delayed recognition that this has always been a profession…It's fair to say that in the field of developmental disabilities, the direct support specialist has the most impact through direct contact with clients." Wyoming is also the first state to offer the internet-based College of Direct Support for instruction of direct support staff. This initiative has resulted in over 100 graduates receiving certificates for program completion. More information is available at Wyoming's direct staff recruitment and retention web site: www.direct-support.org.

Wyoming has also made a major commitment to increase recognition of DSPs. For three straight years Governor Freudenthal spoken at an annual awards banquet for DSPs in Wyoming. The annual award banquet honors eight recipients of the Direct Support Professional of the Year Award, selected from nearly 100 nominees each year. The Professional of the Year awards are part of the "Do You Want Your Job to Make a Difference?" campaign, sponsored by the Wyoming Department of Health Developmental Disabilities Division, Wyoming providers of developmental disabilities services and the Governor's Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities.

Reflecting on the Wyoming experience over the past four years, the Department of Health's Director Dr. Sherard observed that the legislation and training programs helped avert what was becoming a state crisis. "We were experiencing extremely high turnover in the position," he noted. "This is a position that requires training. By being able to offer higher wages and advanced training to those in the field, we feel we have a real cornerstone for success." ■

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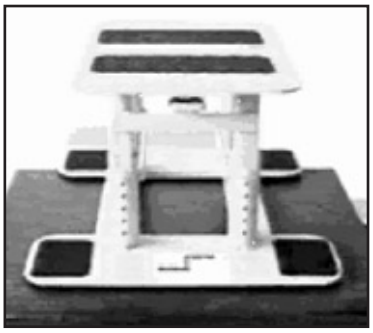

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