



Wage and Benefits for Wisconsin Direct Support Workers

**Findings of a Statewide Study
Conducted by Melissa Mulliken Consulting**

**For the Wisconsin Council on
Developmental Disabilities
and Bureau of Developmental
Disabilities Services**

June 2003

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Introduction

Between 1995 and 2001, the number of Wisconsin citizens served in community-based residential settings more than tripled.

This followed a similar trend nationwide: between 1992 and 1996, for example, there was a 23% decline in the number of individuals in state-operated institutions.

The expansion of community-based services created, and continues to create, labor demands that may look similar to those in other sectors but within which are embedded a profound difference. Low wages, worker shortages and an unstable work force can play havoc with business practices and quality in many employment sectors. Those challenges, in community based residential care, affect the quality of people's lives and their safety. Expectations of what a direct support worker does for the people he or she supports have grown. Today, workers' responsibilities range from assisting someone maintain a job to helping someone stay connected with family to helping someone maintain strength and mobility to engage in day-to-day tasks — responsibilities that contribute directly to an individual's ability to be

productive community members. Arguably, there is no other factor that has more impact on how full, happy or secure a life individuals with developmental disabilities have than the quality and commitment of the direct support worker who assists them.

Being a direct support worker is, in other words, not just another job.

A study commissioned by the Wisconsin Council on Developmental Disabilities (WCDD) and the Bureau of Developmental Disabilities Services (BDDS) in 2002 (Mulliken 2002) looked at worker satisfaction and found that, for a group of vested direct support workers, the relationships with their people with developmental disabilities was their primary motivator and helped mitigate the downsides, such as low pay and status, which they readily acknowledged and with which they were dissatisfied.

In a 1998 study on wage, benefits and turnover in Illinois, Rubin, Park and Braddock cite a number of studies concerning workforce issues and com-

munity based care. They write, "Bacheleder and Braddock (1994) stressed that competence and stability of direct service staff critically affect the quality of life for persons with developmental disabilities....In an early study that polled directors of private residences nationwide, the three most serious

problems reported were inadequate funding, training staff, and maintaining staff (O'Conner & Sitkei, 1973)."

It is not an exaggeration to say that the future of community-based programs lies in the quality of the workers who provide direct support to individuals in these programs and on the ability of employers to recruit and retain those workers. Clearly, wages and benefits, which are in turn influenced by funding and reimbursement

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policies and rates, play a critical role in attracting and keeping good direct care workers.

In Wisconsin, 11,000 people with developmental disabilities rely on the day-to-day support that is funded by the Community Integration Program (CIP), a Medicaid waiver program. The daily rates for CIP Medicaid waiver programs remain stuck at 1994 levels. The state continues to fall behind other states in total federal dollars earned and is currently 37th.

Living wage ordinances in several Wisconsin counties (Dane and Milwaukee, for example) set minimum wage levels, above the federal minimum, for employees at agencies contracting with counties to provide direct support to people with developmental disabili-

ties. But agencies, statewide, struggle with inadequate reimbursement levels while segregated nursing institutions for people with developmental disabilities saw their payments rise by 29 percent and State Centers experienced daily payments increases of 51 percent between 1995 and 2001.

In late 2002, WCDD and BDDS commissioned a wage and benefit survey of agencies with 10 or more employees, providing residential or vocational services to adults with developmental disabilities. The survey was designed to both establish a baseline for future

wage/benefits data and to provide accurate, quantitative information on the status of direct care workers, in residential and vocational settings, throughout Wisconsin.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the future of community-based programs lies in the quality of the workers who provide direct support to individuals in these programs and on the ability of employers to recruit and retain those workers. Clearly, wages and benefits, which are in turn influenced by funding and reimbursement policies and rates, play a critical role in attracting and keeping good direct care workers.

A total of 224 agencies that met the criteria for the survey were identified by WCDD and BDDS staff. Introductory letters, the survey instrument itself and a follow-up post-card were mailed to each of those agencies. Professional interviewers made follow-up phone calls to agencies that had not responded within six weeks. WCDD posted the instrument electronically on its website and respondents could submit the survey over the Internet. Because the study was publicly funded, no incentive was included. A coding system ensured one response per provider.

The survey achieved a 55 percent response rate (123 responses). Many of the agencies in the sample serve multiple counties in Wisconsin. To decrease complexity, make the instrument less burdensome to complete and increase response rate, the instrument asked each respondent to report averages for their agency in some of the wage and benefits questions. Some respondents report that completing the survey took more than one business day.

The sample was that of the entire universe of agencies that met the survey criteria meaning that only non-sampling variability — i.e., some agencies who are unknown to the WCDD may not have been included — is the only sampling bias that exists.

Introduction: References

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Findings

1.0 Wages

Median wages for direct service workers, regardless of tenure and in all settings (residential, vocational) in Wisconsin range from \$7.95 to \$10.43 which is less than what the average worker in Wisconsin earns and, at the lowest end of the median earning range, less than the poverty wage of \$8.19 an hour. The 2002 Federal poverty level wage, for a family of four, is \$10.88, adjusted for cost of living. In Wisconsin, the hourly average starting wage for direct service workers, adjusted for cost of living, is \$9.05.

These low wages affect workers ability to afford basic need such as housing and food. For example, the median wage for direct service workers in Wisconsin (\$9.00) is less than the wage of \$9.11, cited by affordable

housing experts as the amount of income per hour that full-time workers must earn to have their rental housing costs be affordable. At that median wage, in 25 of Wisconsin’s 72 counties, including counties in which a living wage ordinance is in effect, direct service workers are unable to afford a two bedroom apartment at fair market rents (FMR). In Dane County, for example, the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families has found an individual must earn \$13.38 an hour to afford a two-bedroom unit at FMR.

Anecdotal evidence from direct care givers and provider agencies throughout the state suggests that a direct service worker, with one child, making slightly more than the median wage of \$9.00, would have an income

of about \$900 a month, after health care costs and child care. Direct service workers earning the middle or low median wage and with three or more in a household, would qualify for food stamp benefits in Wisconsin. The state median hourly wage for Wisconsin is \$11.84 (1999 dollars). The direct service median (\$9.00) as a percent of state median hourly wage is 76%. For men in Wisconsin, working full time, median earnings are \$37,062 and for women \$25,865. If a direct service worker works full time and makes the median wage of \$9.00 per hour, he or she earns \$18,720 a year, half of the median wage for men and 72% of the wage for women.

	All Respondents Mean (\$/hr)	All Respondents Median (\$/hr)	Residential Mean (\$/hr)	Residential Median (\$/hr)	Vocational Mean (\$/hr)	Vocational Median (\$/hr)
Lowest starting wage direct service workers	\$7.95	\$8.00	\$8.87	\$8.00	\$8.33	\$8.25
Average starting wage direct service workers	\$8.54	\$8.50	\$8.19	\$8.50	\$8.86	\$8.75
Average hourly wage regardless of tenure: direct service workers	\$9.26	\$9.00	\$8.81	\$9.00	\$9.93	\$9.70
Highest starting wage direct service workers	\$10.43	\$10.23	\$10.12	\$10.00	\$10.79	\$10.87

Wages: Notes

- All figures are nominal (not adjusted for inflation or other factors) wages, except as noted.
- “Residential” refers to respondent agencies that only provide residential care (56).

- “Vocational” refers to respondent agencies that only provide vocational programs (55).
- Only seven respondents provided both types of care/programs. Data for that group is included in appendix one.
- The word ‘mean’ refers to the average response, ‘mode’ refers to the most fre-

- quent response, and ‘median’ represents the response that is directly in the center when all responses are ordered.
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) “Personal & Home Care Aides” service occupation code (SOC) most closely represents the direct service worker job description.

2.0 Health Insurance Benefits

Nationally, health care costs rose about 10% in 2001. Table 2.1 shows that Wisconsin direct service agencies have experienced an average increase of 25% in 2001 and Table 2.2 shows that for the majority of respondent agencies, these increases have come on top of three years of increases.

Respondent agencies in this study-- those employing more than 10 people and serving adults in residential and vocational settings -- report medical costs increased by as much as 200% during the previous 12 months. Almost three-fourths of all respondent agencies say their co-payments have increased over the last three years.

Table 2.1

shows the range of medical cost increases including co-payments, premiums and other health insurance costs for respondent agencies.

Respondents	Low	High	Mean	Median
All Respondents	0%	200%	26%	19.5%
Residential	0%	200%	31%	20%
Vocational	0%	63%	18%	16%

Table 2.2

shows health insurance increases at respondent agencies compared to increases in the previous three years.

Respondents	Higher	Lower	The Same
All Respondents	52%	20%	28%
Residential	57%	17%	25.5%
Vocational	47%	22%	31%

3.0 Vacancies and Turnover

According to a Delaware report, “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).” Table 3.1 shows separation rates as measured in this study are higher than national figures.

About half of the 123 respondent agencies had turnover in the past month. About 58% had vacant positions for direct service workers at the time they responded to the survey. About 56 percent of respondents had vacant position for direct service workers on January 1, 2002.

Turnover rate was measured as a crude separation rate, i.e., the study takes into account every direct service worker who left direct service work, regardless of whether they stayed with the organization. The turnover rate was calculated using the proportion of direct service staff leaving direct service work in the

last full month for which the agency had data. Table 3.1 shows the average crude separation rates, during a monthly interval, for respondent agencies was 8.15 percent, about double what recent US labor department statistics showed for voluntary and involuntary separations in private industry. Studies have found turnover rates in privately operated human service agencies greatly exceeded the turnover rates of most US companies.

Replacing workers is also an expensive proposition. Some studies have

found the average expense of replacing a worker is \$30,000. Regardless of how much it costs, it is clear that every time an employee leaves, resources must be invested in recruiting, training new workers as well as diverted to the costs of separation. Those are monies diverted from the agency’s main focus of serving people with developmental disabilities, not to mention the disruption to the lives and well-being of those people with developmental disabilities.

Table 3.1: Separation Rate for Most Recent Month

Respondents	Low Separation Rate	High Separation Rate	Mean Separation Rate
All Respondents	0%	93%	8.15%
Residential	0%	93%	7.02%
Vocational	0%	51%	7.13%

Vacancies and Turnover: Notes

- The study measured a crude turnover rate, i.e. the study takes into account every direct service worker who left direct service work, regardless of

whether they stayed with the organization. The turnover rate was calculated using the proportion of direct service staff leaving direct service work in the last full month for which the agency

had data.

- Studies that look at the costs of replacing a worker can be found at Walker Information, Inc. (www.walkerinfo.com)

4.1 Respondent Profile

No public or state operated residential or vocational providers were included in the study. There were a total of 10,466 employees at the 123 respondent agencies in this study. All told, the respondent agencies serve individuals with developmental disabilities in 71 of Wisconsin's 72 counties (Rusk being the only county for which no respondent reported service).

Of the more than 10,000 employees accounted for in this study, those who perform only direct service accounted for 79 percent of the total (8312 employees); employees performing direct service work with some admin-

istrative duties were 12 percent of the total (1233 employees) and those performing only office and administrative duties were 9 percent of the total (921 employees). Three-fourths of the agencies responding, report employing eight or fewer employees who performed only office or administrative duties.

Tables 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 show the ranges of number of employees in different categories as reported by respondent agencies. The number of direct service workers only, employed by these agencies, ranged from a high of 800 to a low of 2.

There were a total of 10,466 employees at the 123 respondent agencies in this study. All told, the respondent agencies serve individuals with developmental disabilities in 71 of Wisconsin's 72 counties.

Table 4.1

Number of direct service workers (those who provide direct service only) by respondent group

Respondents	Number of Workers Minimum	Number of Workers Maximum	Number of Workers Mean	Number of Workers Median
All Respondents	2	800	74	34
Residential	3	800	102	32
Vocational	2	130	33	20

Table 4.2

Number of employees who manage or supervise others but also provide direct service by respondent group

Respondents	Number of Workers Minimum	Number of workers Maximum	Number of workers Mean	Number of workers Median
All Respondents	1	75	10	5
Residential	0	120	14	4
Vocational	0	30	7	5

Table 4.3

Number of employees who are managers or administrative staff who do not provide direct service by respondent group

Respondents	Number of Workers Minimum	Number of Workers Maximum	Number of Workers Mean	Number of Workers Median
All Respondents	0	96	9	4
Residential	0	78	8	2
Vocational	0	65	8	5

Conclusion

This study focused on gathering information on the current status of wages and health insurance benefits for direct service workers employed at agencies with 10 or more workers, providing residential or vocational programs to adults with developmental disabilities.

The study found that direct service workers in Wisconsin are paid less (a median hourly wage of \$9.00/hour) than the average worker in Wisconsin and, at the lowest end of the median earning range, earn less than the poverty wage of \$8.19 an hour. For agencies that employ those workers, health care costs have soared — rising by as much as 200 percent in one year and rising by an average of 25 percent on top of a three-year trend of rate increases.

More than half of all respondents have vacant positions and more than half have fewer direct service workers on their staff currently than the previous month.

Over the past several decades, community-based residential care has increasingly become the preferred setting for people with developmental disabilities. Over that time, both nationwide and in Wisconsin, investment in community-based care has lagged. Adequate wages, decent benefits and a stable workforce are essential to ensuring a qualified, committed workforce supports individuals with developmental disabilities in community-based settings. In turn, those workers directly and profoundly affect the quality of life for the individuals they serve.

Adequate wages, decent benefits and a stable workforce are essential to ensuring a qualified, committed workforce supports individuals with developmental disabilities in community-based settings.

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Wage and Benefits Study

Tabular Summary

1. Thinking about the field of direct service work, how would you rate the skills and dedication of direct service workers today, compared to five years ago?

Respondents	Much better	Somewhat Better	About the Same	Somewhat Worse	Much Worse
All Respondents	6%	33%	38%	21%	2.5%
Residential	7%	30%	37.5%	21%	4%
Vocational	4%	37.5%	41%	18%	0%

2. Compared to a year ago at this time, how would you rate your agency's success at recruiting committed and qualified workers?

Respondents	Much greater	Somewhat greater	Somewhat worse	Much worse	About the Same
All Respondents	10%	41%	15%	3%	27.5%
Residential	14%	40%	14%	3.5%	23%
Vocational	6%	43%	17%	4%	31.5%

3. The last time you received a budget increase from the County, which items listed below comprised the largest portion of your use of that funding (please check no more than three)

Respondents	Serving New Client	Increase Wages for DS Workers	Improve Benefits for DS Workers	Increase Salaries Office/ Admin. Staff	Improve Benefits Office/ Admin Staff	Maintain Staffing Levels	Maintain Benefit Levels	Add DS Positions	Capital Bldg.	Add Office/ Admin Positions
All Respondents	23%	64%	22%	7%	2%	41%	40%	12%	7%	2.5%
Residential	20%	62.5%	27%	4%	2%	32%	30%	12.5%	12.5%	4%
Vocational	25%	62.5%	20%	11%	4%	46%	55%	12.5%	0%	2%

4. Please tell us how many employees you employ in the following categories:

Respondents	All Respondents Mean	All Respondents Median	Residential Mean	Residential Median	Vocational Mean	Vocational Median
Direct Service Only	74	34	101	32	33	20
Manage or Supervise others and also may provide direct service	10	5	14	4	7	5
Office managers/administrative staff who do not provide direct service	9	4	8	2	8	5

5. Please tell us how many of your direct service staff work

Respondents	All Respondents Mean	All Respondents Median	Residential Mean	Residential Median	Vocational Mean	Vocational Median
Under 20 hours/week	17	5	24	5.5	6	2
20-30 hours/week	13	6	20	10	6	2
30-40 hours/week	21	12	28	15	16	12
40 hours or more a week	38	21	35	10	23	18

6. When a direct service worker chooses to leave your employ, do you collect information in either face-to-face interviews or with a questionnaire?

Respondents	Interview	Questionnaire	Do not collect
All Respondents	56%	22%	22%
Residential	44%	25%	31%
Vocational	69%	19%	12.5%

7. And when they choose to leave, what are the top three reasons they give your agency for leaving?

Respondents	Difficulties with Co-workers	Pay/Benefits	New Job in Same Field	Relocating	Difficulties with Clients	Career Change	Finished School
All Respondents	16%	67%	37%	38.5%	14%	43%	19%
Residential	20%	68%	32%	29%	20%	34%	21%
Vocational	7%	66%	43.5%	50%	11%	55%	14%

8. What is your agency's turnover rate?

Respondents	Low Separation Rate	High Separation Rate	Mean Separation Rate
All Respondents	0%	93%	8.15%
Residential	0%	93%	7.02%
Vocational	0%	51%	7.13%

9. How many vacant positions for direct service workers do you have at the current time?

Respondents	Mean	Median
All Respondents	3.5	1.0
Residential	6.0	2.0
Vocational	1.3	1.0

10. How many vacant positions for direct service workers did you have on January 1, 2002?

Respondents	Mean	Median
All Respondents	5.7	1.0
Residential	7.4	1.0
Vocational	1.4	0.00

11. As an agency, which of the following internet/web resources do you use (choose all that apply)?

Respondents	E-mail	Marketing/ Advertising	Home Page/ Website	Research	Not Connected to Internet/Web
All Respondents	86%	31%	42.5%	45%	7.5%
Residential	79%	23%	32%	45%	14%
Vocational	94.5%	34.5%	47%	45.5%	2%

12. What is the average wage paid, regardless of tenure, for the following categories of employees at your agency?

Respondents	All Respondents Mean (\$/hr)	All Respondents Median	Residential Mean	Residential Median (\$/hr)	Vocational Mean (\$/hr)	Vocational Median (\$/hr)
Direct Service Staff	\$9.26	\$9.00	\$8.81	\$9.00	\$9.93	\$9.70
Manage or supervise others and may also provide direct service	\$13.31	\$13.00	\$11.24	\$11.67	\$15.48	\$15.00
Office or Administrative staff	\$13.66	\$13.00	\$12.46	\$12.32	\$14.89	\$13.45

13. Please indicate the average starting wage paid for each of these categories of employees:

Respondents	All Respondents Mean (\$/hr)	All Respondents Median (\$/hr)	Residential Mean (\$/hr)	Residential Median (\$/hr)	Vocational Mean (\$/hr)	Vocational Median (\$/hr)
Direct Service staff	\$8.54	\$8.50	\$8.19	\$8.50	\$8.86	\$8.75
Manage or supervise others and may also provide direct service	\$11.12	\$10.36	\$10.57	\$10.50	\$9.89	\$9.95
Office or administrative staff	\$12.23	\$11.50	\$10.46	\$10.64	\$13.40	\$12.52

**14. What is the lowest starting wage paid for direct service workers in any of the programs you administer?
15. What is the highest starting wage paid for direct service workers in any of the programs you administer?**

Respondents	All Respondents Mean (\$/hr)	All Respondents Median (\$/hr)	Residential Mean (\$/hr)	Residential Median (\$/hr)	Vocational Mean (\$/hr)	Vocational Median (\$/hr)
14. Direct Service staff Lowest starting wage	\$7.95	\$8.00	\$8.87	\$8.00	\$8.33	\$8.25
15. Direct Service staff Highest starting wage	\$10.43	\$10.23	\$10.12	\$10.00	\$10.79	\$10.87

16. Currently, what is the single most important criteria you use when making decisions about salary/wage increase?

Respondents	Performance	Cost of Living	Longevity	County Budget
All Respondents	34%	11%	5%	50%
Residential	34%	7%	5%	54%
Vocational	33%	13%	4%	50%

17. In order to produce the highest quality care for the individuals your agency supports, which criteria would you prefer to use?

Respondents	Performance	Cost of Living	Longevity	County Budget
All Respondents	89%	3%	6%	2%
Residential	88.5%	2%	8%	2%
Vocational	90%	4%	4%	2%

18. How often does your company/agency conduct a wage/salary review?

Respondents	Semi-annually	Annually, calendar or fiscal year end	Annually, anniversary date	No formal review cycle
All Respondents	9%	47%	24%	19%
Residential	9%	40%	28%	23%
Vocational	9%	55%	21%	15%

19. Please tell us the average pay increases received in the last 12 months for all employees in your agency/company.

Respondents	No increase	0%-1%	1%-2%	3% or more
All Respondents	10%	5%	29%	56%
Residential	16%	7%	36%	41%
Vocational	4%	4%	21%	71%

20. Please tell us the average pay increase you expect to give your direct service staff in your next budget cycle?

Respondents	No increase	0%-1%	1%-2%	3% or more
All Respondents	8%	17%	27%	47%
Residential	12%	16%	36%	36%
Vocational	5.5%	18%	20%	56%

21. What percentage of full-time direct service workers worked overtime in the last pay period?

Respondents	Mean	Median
All Respondents	19%	6%
Residential	23%	19%
Vocational	10%	0%

22. On average, how many overtime hours do full time employees who perform direct service work only, work per week?

Respondents	Mean	Median
All Respondents	1.54	1.00
Residential	1.73	2.0
Vocational	1.20	1.00

23. Please describe how vacation time is accrued at your agency.

24. When are staff eligible to receive an increase in the rate of vacation accrual?

25. If you offer a medical plan, which, if any, of the following health care overages to you provide? (please choose more than one if applicable)

Respondents	Indemnity Plan	HMO	PPO	Point of Services	No Medical Plan
All Respondents	3%	38%	45%	14%	7.5%
Residential	4%	34.5%	40%	14.5%	13%
Vocational	2%	47%	43%	14%	4%

26. And, what, if any, contribution does your organization make to your employee health insurance premium costs?

Respondents	Low	High	Mean	Median
All Respondents	0%	200%	25%	19.5%
Residential	0%	200%	31%	20%
Vocational	0%	63%	18%	16%

27. Has your agency co-payment increased over the last three years?

Respondents	Yes	No
All Respondents	73%	26%
Residential	72%	28%
Vocational	74%	24%

28. If your medical costs increased in the last 12 months, by what percentage?

Respondents	Mean	Median
All Respondents	26%	19.5%
Residential	31%	20%
Vocational	18%	16%

29. If your medical costs have increased in the last 12 months, how does that increase compare to the previous three years of increases?

Respondents	Higher	Lower	The Same
All Respondents	52%	20%	28%
Residential	57%	17%	25.5%
Vocational	47%	22%	31%

30. If your agency's liability insurance premiums increased this renewal term, how does this compare to the previous term?

Respondents	Higher % increase	Lower % increase	Same % increase	Denied/not available
All Respondents	70%	4.5%	24%	2%
Residential	71%	8%	21%	0%
Vocational	64%	2%	30%	4%

31. Please tell us what other benefits are provided by your organization (check all that apply)

Respondents	Use of Car	Mileage	Savings Plan	EAP	125 Plan	Car Allowance	Tuition Reimbursement	On-site or off-site Child Car3	Wellness/Fitness
All Respondents	16%	92%	17%	28%	55%	6%	38.5%	5%	12%
Residential	16%	89%	18%	21%	39%	9%	30%	4%	9%
Vocational	12.5%	98%	14%	30%	68%	2%	46%	5%	16%

32. Please list the county or counties your serve.

33. What is your annual operating budget? If you operate in states other than Wisconsin, please provide your budget for your Wisconsin operations only.

What % is spent on recruitment/hiring/training?

What % is spent on wages/benefits for all employees?

What % is spent on wages/benefits for employees who perform direct service work only?

Respondents	All Respondents Mean (\$/hr)	All Respondents Median (\$/hr)	Residential Mean (\$/hr)	Residential Median (\$/hr)	Vocational Mean (\$/hr)	Vocational Median (\$/hr)
Percent on recruitment/hiring/training	4%	1.5%	8%	3%	5%	1%
Percent on wages/benefits for all employees	67%	70%	60%	70%	64%	70%
Percent on wages/benefits for employees who perform direct service work only	52%	54%	55%	60%	48%	52%