

The Collaborative for Citizen Directed Supports-New Jersey  
Mapping the Future: Sustaining a Vibrant DSP Workforce

Innovation Spotlight: An interview with the Collaborative NJ describing the Interactive Map, a tool to create an innovative, sustainable solution to the Direct Support Professional workforce crisis. By linking people looking for work with people needing support based on geographical location as well as shared interests, and other aspects of personal and professional dynamics, the Interactive Map allows for a connection that is more likely to have longevity and to result in outcomes that are favorable to both parties. The Collaborative NJ received the Administration for Community Living's **Blazing New Trails for Community Based Direct Support Professionals Prize Challenge** for this project.

**Can you describe the Collaborative NJ and the work you do?**

What started in 2016 as a way to gather Support Coordination Agencies who believed the priority of the role of the SC was to assist people in exercising their inherent right to self determination, not making referrals to disability service organizations, has evolved to a statewide organization comprised of all stakeholders who hold the right for everyone to exercise autonomy and control over their own lives as the priority for themselves, their family members and for the people with whom they work.

What The Collaborative NJ represents (to me) today is an organization made up (a gathering )of people that value the person as the center of all considerations, including how the system partners need to think, plan and support them (share the person centered thinking and planning values). Made up of self advocates, family members, supports brokerage agencies, support coordination agencies and others, we value the opportunity to have this group of like-minded people to brainstorm, problem solve, connect with and ultimately work to make the service system work for the people using it.

**The organization recently received a Workforce Innovation Grant from the Administration for Community Living. Can you describe the goals of project?**

From 2016 until the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, The Collaborative for Citizen Directed Supports -NJ worked diligently to connect system stakeholders dedicated to enhancing and growing self direction, and driving innovation in services through Community Conversations, in person forums held in neighborhoods, towns and regions throughout the state. These conversations led to connections with generic community resources as well as policy makers highlighting the importance of planning and honoring the person accepting services and their families as the leaders, with professionals acting as facilitators, helping to navigate and learn about the resources, services and supports available to them as they sought to live lives of meaning, of their own design.

When the pandemic forced congregate services to close or downsize, this left people and their families in search of the support they needed to keep themselves safe and well, and their families needing respite and support to keep themselves employed and healthy. The Collaborative members began brainstorming about ways to offer support to people, and to the Direct Support Professionals and Self Directed Employees who were becoming underemployed or unemployed.

The idea of using a map was shared by one of the Collaborative's members who is a community service provider. They use Google Maps to view their employee locations in relation to where the people they support live. The Collaborative built on that idea as a quick and perhaps safer way to connect available DSPs & SDE<sup>1</sup>s with people who were separately in need of their services -remember Spring 2020?

After applying for and being awarded a Community Innovations Grant by the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities (NJ CDD), the Collaborative was able to contract with a person using services, in the role of Self Advocate Advisor. This role is available for people who are experiencing challenges and have questions about how to best use the Interactive Map. The Self Advocate Advisor shares his personal insight as someone with experience, being there to tell us what he goes through and helping people develop their own solutions.

The Collaborative was also able to contract with a Map Facilitator who monitors and responds to inquiries, guides prospective agencies on how to join the Collaborative, initiate and use the Interactive Map as well keeping information up to date. The Map Facilitator also leads the outreach and education of the community on the Interactive Map and promotes it on social media to grow its capacity to be a resource for people using services and staff. The Map Facilitator will be prioritizing the expanded use of the Interactive Map on our social media sites and making use of You Tube as an accessible way for people to learn how to use it. A focus is ensuring Self Directed Employees are aware of the Interactive Map and assist with setting them up for success in using the tool.

The grant also enabled the Collaborative to develop educational and outreach content so that New Jersey stakeholders could learn about the Interactive Map and use it. That funding enabled us to prepare for what was to come...

In November 2020, the Administration for Community Living introduced the ***Blazing New Trails for Community Based Direct Support Professionals Prize Challenge*** and The Collaborative

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<sup>1</sup> *Self Directed Employee (SDE) is the term used for DSPs who are hired directly by people using self direction in New Jersey. The SDE is hired directly by the person with a disability or their surrogate if they are the Employer of Record or by the Agency with Choice Fiscal Intermediary if the person or their surrogate has chosen to be a Managing Employer rather than the Employer of Record.*

Board agreed to enter this challenge knowing that we were (and still are) a volunteer led organization with no revenue or infrastructure. But our vision was (and is) clear, and we knew the Interactive Map was working, and had potential to impact significant change.

We accepted the Challenge and began work on innovative solutions for the three Challenge goals: increase, stabilize and build the capacity of the DSP workforce. We used the Problem Statement to guide our initial steps:

**Due to the lack of stability of the workforce, many individuals are unable to obtain all the services they need, limiting true inclusion in society and reducing quality of life. There are several concerns related to attracting and retaining DSPs, including the rising need for services creating competition for workers; shifts in the types of services needed; low wages; lack of benefits; and lack of training and promotion opportunities.**

We started by researching for evidence that the idea of the Interactive Map could work to impact the DSP workforce challenges. We readily found the availability of other similar tools and located several ‘map like’ resources where people can view profiles of available service providers and choose a service provider based on preferences, interests, and location. Service providers, on the other hand, can share availability, strengths, interests, and preferences. This option has promoted direct access between those seeking support, and those providing it (or wanting to) however, there are challenges with understanding and accessing technology as well as cost. Resources such as My Support and Joshin are two examples but carry costs to the users. As we researched for the ACL Challenge, we become increasingly confident that not only was it feasible to use the Interactive Map, but that it can be scaled while improving on its customization and accessibility.

Outside of the HCBS system, we know (and perhaps you do too) of other map-based services. Uber and Lyft provide increasingly easy ways to grab a ride with or without others and offer opportunities for licensed and insured drivers to earn money either full time or around their other career and life priorities. Door Dash offers the same opportunities for people to obtain food from their favorite restaurants and employment of those who want to drive to, pick up and deliver it.

Our research enabled us to find information relevant to the three goal areas:

**DSP Workforce Size:** Sessions et al. (2021) explored a subset within the sharing economy – workers who engage in “side hustles”. While we are not keen on this term -the potential for it being used disrespectfully- there exists the potential for the sharing economy to support growth within the DSP workforce through part-time work. The Interactive Map can be shared with educational providers, ancillary support professionals and if we continue to expand the notion of recruiting based on shared values, interests and not just experience with supporting people with disabilities, the Interactive Map can be targeted for specific interests or professions such as musicians, beekeepers, auto enthusiasts, book club members and just about any hobby

or interest available to us. The Interactive Map can enable those who may not even know such opportunities for work, career and altruism exist in their own neighborhoods and communities.

**DSP Workforce Stability:** The DSP workforce has consistently had high rates of turnover. Yet, many within the DSP workforce thrive and maintain employment. To understand who thrives within the DSP workforce, Crane and Havercamp (2020) sought to explore what motivates the DSPs who remain employed. Accessing DSP professionals through the National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals' (NADSP) Facebook Group, researchers analyzed the results from 195 survey participants. Data analysis showed that DSPs who are resilient to stress are “motivated by family, social relationships and the desire to contribute to the well-being of their community” (p.5). Additionally, researchers found a low desire for competition, self-promotion, or career advancement. While this study is limited to the participants of the NADSP Facebook Group, this study has important implications on the type of characteristics of the DSP who thrives in potentially high stress and yet meaningful environments.

For DSPs who enjoy the relationships with people they support but are not satisfied with their employer, the Interactive Map provides opportunities for them to seek out other people, and potential organizations where there is more alignment with employment benefits, values and vision. The Interactive Map allows for all participants (providers and DSPs) to advertise availability and has details to ensure quality DSP-to-person supported connections. When a quality connection is made, the DSP is already lined up for success in the position which can lead to a higher quality of services overall. The DSP would then have the possibility of a true respectful working relationship which fosters knowledge sharing and trust. All these factors contribute to improving and ensuring the stability and longevity of the DSP with that individual.

Ironically, we learned that stability should not necessarily mean an obsession with retention of DSPs and turnover. The future of the HBCS system being able to fulfill its purpose means that participants truly need to have choice and control over their services and supports and those who provide them. Most important is access to information, resources and support to make informed decisions and to be able to change their minds as their experiences build their expertise over their own lives. This must include being able to de-select a provider whether that is an agency or a DSP. The Interactive Map provides opportunities for people to search continually and privately for potential DSPs and/or DSP agencies.

**DSP Workforce Capability:** Several studies have posited the need to increase access to training to improve the working environment (Friedman, 2021b; Bogenschutz, Nord, & Hewitt, 2015) however; improving access to training alone will not solve the problem. The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) and NADSP contend that the approach to address the challenges needs to be comprehensive and include a variety of measures that address livable wages, ongoing training and development, and access to available technologies (2016).

Johnson, Bailey, Weiss, and Eidelman (2021) sought to gain an understanding of the DSP workforce. Using a 14-question survey and disseminating it through NADSP's Facebook Group, researchers collected 440 responses. In addition to surveys, they conducted 24 interviews with

DSPs employed by six agencies. Thematic analysis was used to analyze content from the interviews and surveys. Respondents of the surveys and interviews indicated that they would be able to do their job better if:

- agencies or supervisors would encourage or permit autonomy,
- have access to quality training when needed,
- hire/employ motivated staff (colleagues),
- improve/increase funding, and
- create reasonable job expectations.

While the study was limited to the survey participants, findings shed light on the needs and perspectives of the DSP workforce. The Interactive Map is a tool that enables more autonomy and control on the part of the DSP, serves as learning forum and can be enhanced to include relevant information such as job requirements, qualifications and expectations all directed by the person seeking service, not just an agency or a supervisor.

Recent research has focused on the direct experiences of DSPs to understand causes and possible solutions to the sustainability of the DSP workforce. DSPs indicated needing access to ongoing training as well as access to adequate funds and compensation (Vassos, Nankervis, Skerry, & Lane, 2019; Johnson, Bailey, Weiss, & Eidelman, 2021). The resulting research has shown that current and potential DSPs need a dynamic solution to the DSP workforce shortage.

The goal of the project was to create an innovative, sustainable solution to the Direct Support Professional workforce crisis. By linking people looking for work with people needing support based on geographical location as well as shared interests, and other aspects of personal and professional dynamics, the Interactive Map allows for a connection that is more likely to have longevity and to result in outcomes that are favorable to both parties.

The Collaborative continues to build on this as a work-in-progress that now includes an interactive virtual map indicating where DSP/SDEs are available for work so that people and families can contact them directly to interview and potentially select for hire either through the agency they use for services or as an SDE. People and families in need of services can also post their request for support, and can control the process by which they meet, interview and potentially select or hire someone safely and quickly.

### **How is the project innovative? (what about this approach is different)**

The Collaborative's response to this issue amidst the global pandemic was to respond efficiently and differently to the urgent shortages while also noting that perhaps paradoxically, the tragedy, loss, overwhelming of health care resources and the absolute devastation to families and communities, there were drivers of innovation that became not only apparent but seemingly unavoidable.

As the world emerges from the global pandemic brought on by the COVID-19 virus, many are looking to reimagine and reinvent their personal and professional lives. To that end, the HCBS

System needs to recognize the accelerating trends and take this opportunity to confront anew and aspire to solve the Direct Support Professional Workforce crisis.

These societal trends, as excerpted from the (<https://www.ghd.com/en/perspectives/ten-emerging-trends-shaping-our-new-future.aspx>), align with the vision and values, and best practices within HCBS and include:

- The rise of **social capitalism** which “...recognizes **interdependence** and the good of humanity based on collective actions of countries, businesses and people will start to emerge. As a result, companies will change their governance and business management models with greater focus on corporate social responsibility and the well-being of people.”
- The **pace of digital acceleration** that compelled companies to adapt during the pandemic to survive and, for some thrive. COVID-19 will [continue to] force companies to take radical steps to **adopt technology advancements**, and moderni[z]e culture, organi[z]ational structures, measurement systems and operating architectures. As 5G internet becomes more widely available, it will **increase the use of online internet systems**.
- The use of an **on-demand workforce** will increase as the economic impact of COVID-19 happens. As a result, companies and people will have to **embrace technology-enabled on-demand workforce models and platforms**. This would improve workforce planning, financial management and access to diverse skills. Companies should understand and learn how to engage and retain on-demand talent with improved People Management programs, strategies and tools to make value for an on-demand workforce.
- A new burning platform for healthcare reform [that will] force the healthcare industry to transform and **provide care that is more equitable**. This will create new opportunities for many, who are involved in building the new system.
- The **definition of ‘workplace’ will change** and could permanently shift working patterns. New norms will be established for these working conditions, redefining work life and personal life boundaries.
- Industries will be forced to **reinvent their workforce with upskilling and reskilling** becoming a major priority
- **Technology will continue to drive innovation across business models** in various industries, allowing new businesses to enter the market and disrupt incumbents in serious ways. In order to drive business growth, stay relevant in changing times, and differentiate from the competition, **business leaders must be able to think creatively and embrace innovation** to create break-through value for their customers. In the post COVID-19 era, there will be a **greater need to increase innovation and move away from the comfort of operating ‘business as usual’**. If organizations do not adapt to new ways of working, they may experience an existential crisis.

We knew that action must not only be immediate but different from past attempts to rectify this issue. To meet the urgency that COVID-19 presented the HCBS system, The Interactive Map takes existing technology and provides an alternative response.

Assisting people to find staff, like other areas of our private and public sectors has been more difficult through and post pandemic. The Interactive Map offers an alternative to resources like Monster and Indeed, in that the person themselves, as well as the potential employee are in control of the search and initial connection. It allows people to connect based on location, availability and shared interests, preferences, skills sets and aspirations.

The genius of this project is its simplicity, sustainability and replicability. There is no fancy software to purchase. Once set up it requires minimum effort to keep updated. The cost is fixed for agencies and free to people

**How did you come to the idea for this project? (why was it needed, why are you taking a different approach, how did it get started)**

Amidst crisis is opportunity. We saw it and sought to do something. Not replicate old ideas because it was obvious those were not working. A simple idea that was built on an existing resource, a google map and infused with the principles of the self determination movement: freedom, authority, support, responsibility and the confirmation of the importance of self advocacy on the part of the person seeking supports, and those looking to provide it.

**If this project reaches its goals, what will the impact be on the lives of people with disabilities? (related to improving quality of life)**

- Self determination is realized for those using HCBS
- A more self determined workforce
- Quicker ways to find the staff people want; they are in control
- Less wait time than with more traditional recruitment tools
- Cost effective with little to no cost to the end users
- Accessible, and support is built in
- People can find local support, and employment

Once brought to scale, this could revolutionize the way people with disabilities are supported in their own homes and communities and could offer a more practical and effective means for people to be attracted to this field, retain their interest and commitment as well as enhance their learning and personal and professional development.

