



The DSP Chronicles

PROFILE 15 • DECEMBER 2011

Elvin Alvarez: A Young DSP & Manager Making A Big Difference at Miami CP Residential Services

BY: TOM KING

Elvin Alvarez is not your typical 26 year old. Ask anyone at Miami Cerebral Palsy (MCP) Residential Services about him and you'll quickly learn that this young Colombian is a star, a rock-solid Direct Support Professional (DSP) who also is now a Residential Services Coordinator. Part of his job is to train others to become DSPs. He's that good!

Consider these Elvin Alvarez milestones:

- Earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology with a minor in Organizational Psychology from the Universidad Tecnologica de Bolivar in Colombia, South America at the age of 20.
- Is among a select few nationwide DSP-Cs who participated in the formal portfolio submission review and critique process for DSP-Registered seeking to gain DSP-Credentialed status.
- First DSP and MCP employee to earn DSP-Credentialed status from the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP).

His thirst for knowledge and accomplishments endure. In the fall of 2012 he will begin working on his Master's in Behavioral Analysis at Florida International University. "Then I'd like to start work on my Ph.D, maybe in Clinical

Psychology," Elvin says. "I am motivated, and always have been, to continue learning, to continue my education. Otherwise I would not be happy."

Elvin came to MCP Residential in 2007 when he left his homeland in Colombia to work in the United States. He found MCP and didn't know if he'd like the work. He did. He began as others do – as a DSP Apprentice – and was assigned to the Braddock facility, which supports 24 people with varying disabilities. Today he is the Assistant Administrator at Braddock, but works daily with clients, trains DSPs and at heart remains a DSP in spirit and in is normal work day.

Kellen Hassell is the Braddock Facility Administrator and Elvin's boss. He says this about his young Assistant Administrator: "One of the things that everyone can agree upon is that Elvin is absolutely just fun to work with and be around. He's confident and secure and takes his role supporting individuals with disabilities and our staff very seriously."

Hassell remembers a situation that he says exemplifies Elvin's maturity and poise under pressure. In February 2009 one of the agency's vehicles was carrying four MCP Braddock residents on an outing. Elvin was in the car behind them. Another car ran a red light and plowed into the MCP vehicle.

“Learn what makes us the same.”



Elvin Alvarez

Age: 26

Home: Miami, FL

Position: Assistant Administrator/ Qualified Developmental Disability Professional/Direct Support Professional

Where: Miami Cerebral Palsy Residential Services, Inc.

Key Quote by Gina:

"We make a difference in their lives. That's what being a DSP is all about. It's simple."

Number of People He Supports:
24

How a Colleague Describes Gina:

"It's not often that you get such a great mix of light-heartedness and spirit, combined with the maturity of someone who only gets stronger when you really need them to step-up and take charge. Elvin has an outstanding sense of self-awareness and personal insight. He also continues to develop a deeper understanding of the emotions and needs of others around him." – Kellen Hassell, Elvin's Immediate Supervisor.



“It was a pretty horrific accident that resulted in some serious injuries. Elvin was one of the first people on the scene, intervened, stepped-up, kept his composure amongst the chaos, and played a key role in relaying critical information to our Executive Director and to the EMS/911 Rescue personnel for the four individuals and staff under his supervision,” Hassell recounted. “He had valuable and key information for the paramedics about how to deal with our clients and their disabilities. Once those four individuals came back to our facility, Elvin worked very closely with our interdisciplinary team and medical department to support the full recovery of those who sustained the most severe and extensive injuries.”

Hassell added this: “He enjoys taking charge in a crisis situation when things don’t go according to plan. He doesn’t panic, he keeps his composure, he doesn’t take things personally, and he really seems to respond very well under pressure and enjoys taking on that ultimate responsibility.”

During National DSP Recognition Week the Florida Association of Direct Support Professionals (FADSP) honored him as a “DSP Making a Difference.”

When you ask Elvin about his primary responsibilities, he gives you a list of the top 12, and among those are: works with families and outside providers....maintains all client information and records....conducts quality assurance monitoring....helps with staff development and training and is a reviewing officer for DSPs....on call 365/24/7 for anything that comes up....participates as On-Duty staff on a rotating basis on weekends and holidays and is Officer on Duty for weekends and holidays.

His motivation to learn also included the College of Direct Support (CDS) curriculum. “We have no training like this in my country. I enjoyed the CDS curriculum because it was something additional to all of the training components that I did once I was hired at MCP. I really liked all the courses because they show ‘the big picture’ of what DSPs need to be doing to provide great supports. Also, it was important because I learned additional things I did not learn in my normal training.”

This matches his passion for becoming a DSP-Credentialed through NADSP. “When I first read about the NADSP credentialing program (DSP-R; DSP-C; DSP-S), I said to myself I would become a DSP-C,” he explained. “It was not an easy task, but after several workshops I understood the right way to create portfolios, and then I could complete my DSP-C application package. It was fun doing this. It made me think beyond just providing services to individuals with disabilities. Currently, I am helping (coaching) DSPs at MCP to do their DSP-C application packages.”

Hassell described one other problem that Elvin solved. For a while, MCP had struggled with creating, organizing, and maintaining a stable group of On-Call DSPs to step into roles in a last-minute or emergency basis. He described the system that was used was “inconsistent and not always efficient or maximized staff talent or effectiveness.”

In stepped Elvin, who had come to understand the need for stability in the lives of those they support. “Looking at this problem with a big-picture mentality in that it was impacting nearly all MCP residents and staff, Elvin was able to attack it and solve the problem employing a great attention to

detail and by remaining organized,” Hassell said. “He became the ultimate gate-keeper for the On-Call staff at the Braddock Facility. He created a simple, yet perfectly designed system of organizing the On-Call staff schedules at our Braddock Facility by working 1:1 with our Residential Service Coordinator supervisors on a weekly basis in order to plan ahead for the need for On-Call and additional fill-in staff based on what is happening in the individuals’ lives at that time and also planning for the unexpected by allowing for free blocks where On-Call staff would be available in the event of a last-minute change or emergency.”

The result? Elvin’s system matched On-Call DSPs with clients they knew and who the people being supported knew.

“The bottom line is that Elvin was able to essentially see both sides of the issue. Unlike those who favor one approach over the other, Elvin has shown increasingly that he is not wedded to one particular mode of conceptualizing or solving a problem,” Hassell added. “Those of us who know him really well see where he typically falls on an issue, but he has demonstrated an ability to literally use both his left brain and his right brain (without prejudice) in order to work to implement whatever is necessary, whatever the situation demands – not what he arbitrarily prefers. That’s another extremely significant way that Elvin’s maturity as a person and professional greatly impacts us at MCP.”

He began as a DSP. Today, he manages and helps train DSPs and down deep he’s still a DSP. “We make a difference in their lives,” Elvin said. “That’s what being a DSP is all about. It’s simple.”

The Job, The People & More: From Elvin Alvarez

Describe your primary responsibilities:

- Responsible for ensuring compliance with active treatment regulations and ensure that each individual receives a continuous and aggressive active treatment program.
- Representative for the facility with outside providers and individuals’ families.
- Responsible for maintenance of individual information and records
- Participates in on-going staff development and training in both

formal and informal setting with professionals, paraprofessionals and other staff members.

- Directly hires, supervises, and evaluates performance for residential service coordinators and acts as a reviewing officer for DSPs along with facility administrator.
- Collaboratively supervises Physical Therapist, Occupational Therapist, and Speech Therapist & Dietician.
- Conducts quality assurance monitoring and makes periodic visits to the individual's homes to monitor personal appearance and living environment, giving emphasis to the normalization principle and personal outcomes.
- Participates in the On-Duty staff on a rotating basis to include serving as Officer on Duty on the weekend, holidays, night shift monitoring and contact with all shifts on a routine basis.
- Participate in activities of various committees concerned with individual care and the general operation of the facility (i.e., management meetings, town meetings, safety committee, Leadership meetings, etc.).
- Maintain an accurate and current inventory of the program department's

supplies and equipment.

- Responsible for being on-call & being responsive to facility needs 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year and develops formal back-up & communication systems when not available.

What is the most enjoyable part of the job for you?

"The most enjoyable part of my job is the interaction I have with the individuals we support and my co-workers. Essentially, I really like to see how we can make someone's life better with our actions."

What is the most challenging part of the job?

"Well, I think that the most challenging part of my job is time management. Currently, I have multiple responsibilities and my success depends on how I organize my time to complete everything I need to get done."

What got you interested in being a DSP?

"At the beginning, when I first came to Miami, I had chosen this position just because I did not have too many opportunities. But then, after I started to interact with the individuals I was supporting, I really felt that I liked what I was doing. I really have enjoyed every position I have been in here at Miami Cerebral Palsy."

Describe the types of supports you provide for your clients.

Describe the types of supports you provide for your clients. "I work with 24 clients. My setting is residential but I also coordinate when clients go to Public Schools or Adult Learning Programs.

Mainly, the biggest support I provide is that every single individual at the facility receives active supports, community inclusion, and adequate medical care as needed."

Tell us a little about the people you support.

"Unfortunately, our individuals are very medically fragile. All of them are wheelchair bound. Most of them are diagnosed with cerebral palsy, intellectual disabilities, and seizure disorders, among others."

Would you recommend the career of being a DSP to others and why?

"Yes, I have recommended this career because I believe that being a DSP is a very interesting position where people can learn many things and for the great impact that any DSP has in a client's life. I always say that we as DSPs learn and experience many things while making someone's life better."

The DSP Chronicles

This publication introduces you to Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) from around the country and chronicles their stories as they go about the important work of direct support. They discuss the job: the challenges, the success stories, how they work with those they support and the unique ways they get the job done. DSPs are America's quiet and unknown heroes. Their dedicated and hard work improves the lives of those they support. Many work more than one job. They are devoted to the DSP profession and to those they serve.

If you would like to nominate a DSP to be featured, please email Lisa Simon at lisa.simon@elsevier.com.



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