EVALUATION BRIEF

The North Carolina College of Direct Support Demonstration Project

By Amy Hewitt and Renee Hepperlen

Need for the College of Direct Support in North Carolina

The direct support profession is one of the fastest growing industries in North Carolina (North Carolina Department of Labor, 2009). The rate of turnover in the DSP profession continues to be high, even with widespread unemployment. State employment projections indicate that there will continue to be substantial lack of candidates to fulfill the needs of this industry in the future. The need to provide a competent, sustainable, and valued direct support workforce is a critical factor in meeting the needs of people with intellectual, developmental, and other disabilities in the long-term services and supports industry in North Carolina.

In 2007, the North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities sponsored a three-year demonstration project to assess the use of the College of Direct Support (CDS) curriculum to train direct support professionals (DSPs) and improve the workforce. The demonstration included nine organizations affiliated with the North Carolina Providers Council that sought to achieve five objectives, including to: (a) maximize the number of learners in each organization, (b) develop recognition and incentive programs for DSPs, (c) reduce organizational turnover and vacancy rates, (d) improve DSP competence in critical areas related to personal-centered services and supports, cultural competence, confidentiality and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), and (e) demonstrate cost-effectiveness of training.

How Has the College of Direct Support Been Used in North Carolina?

The North Carolina Providers Council conducted this demonstration project. The Council is the state's largest cross-disability provider association and includes 82 member agencies found state-wide that provide services to over 90,000 individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental

Purpose

The College of Direct Support is committed to ongoing evaluation of the quality of its curriculum, its ease of use to learners, the usefulness of its human resource functions and its contributions to the lives of persons with disabilities.

A wide range of quantitative and qualitative evaluation activities are being undertaken to provide this information.

The Evaluation Brief provides a sampling of findings from CDS data collection activities occurring at the national, state, agency and individual levels. If you have questions about, suggestions for, or requests of the College of Direct Support in the area of evaluation, please let us know at: *nord0364@umn.edu*

illness, and co-occurring conditions. Nine member agencies of the Council participated in the demonstration project. These organizations were diverse in several ways, including location, size of the organization and scope of services provided. The demonstration organizations represented different geographic areas with an array of town sizes. They also ranged in organizational size from 40 to 2,900 employees and served from 75 to 6,500 individuals with disabilities.

One of the greatest strengths of CDS is the flexibility with which the curriculum can be implemented and this strength was leveraged in this demonstration project. Through CDS, organizations are able to customize training to achieve a "best fit" with their organizational culture. In this demonstration, there were no prescriptive guidelines related to the type, number or sequencing of CDS courses that learners completed. Organizations were free to determine what courses would best meet organizational training needs and objectives. Learners were also able to go beyond the curriculum organizations had designed and could electively choose to take additional lessons. In this demonstration, nearly all of the organizations used CDS with new employees as a means to orient and ensure basic skills. CDS was employed to satisfy the mandatory requirements for training DSPs.

Organizations were also able to create unique strategies to implement CDS. Rather than holding classroom trainings, organizations were able to modify or discontinue training on topics related to documentation, safety and cultural competence with delivery through CDS on-line. DSP supervisors were able to use on-the-job skill development checklists that are a part of the CDS lessons to improve and direct skill growth in staff. As another example, the CDS curriculum was paired with the North Carolina Workforce Investment Network (WIN) to match educational expenses for staff to further their education to earn GEDs, certifications and associate's degrees.

Learners Outcomes

Several positive results were realized through CDS. During this demonstration project, direct support learners and supervisors completed 158,109 hours of CDS training–an average of 82 hours per learner. This outcome is significant, given the number of hours per participant and what it would have cost an organization to send employees to 82 hours of training. Learning and comprehension also improved in the participants with an average gain in knowledge of 24.5% as measured through a pre-and post-test assessment built into CDS. Several organizations reported that observable performance changes took place as a result of CDS. As an example, one organization shared a story that content from the *Safety at Home and in the Community* course resulted in improved safety practices within the organization.

Direct Course

Organizational Outcomes

The agencies involved in the project experienced a number of positive organizational outcomes. Changes occurred in training practices, recognition and incentive programs, turnover, and cost effectiveness.

Training Practices

Each organization reported that the demonstration facilitated their use of new training approaches, ranging from implementation of training labs to allowing learners to complete training anytime and at places of their choosing. Some of the organizations used CDS to train new employees, some used it to train long-term employees, and others used it to train both. Nearly all of the organizations trained both DSPs and supervisors or managers using CDS. The CDS uses active learning instruction methods that reinforce learning through the use of voice clips, video clips, and interactive exercises. On-the-job training skills and portfolio development enhance the learning process. This made CDS user-friendly but also challenging to all levels of staff that participated in the project.

Recognition and Incentive Practices

Organizations also used CDS to enhance or create recognition and incentive programs. Some of the organizations created new recognition programs that included celebration and graduation events, receiving diplomas or certificates (which included National Direct Support Credentials), and, in some cases, wage increases upon completion of training components. Others used CDS as a tool or resource to recognize and provide new opportunities for long-term employees or to encourage employees to take advantage of education incentive programs.

Annual DSP Turnover

The average reduction in turnover across these seven organizations was 6.9%. This reduction in turnover can be significant, depending on the size of the organization. It results in the ability of an organization to use resources differently to support their employees rather than pay for the cost of training new employees. Previous studies on the cost of addressing turnover by hiring new employees to work as DSPs in community organizations, both nationally and in other states have yielded cost estimates of $2,400 for each new hire (Larson & Hewitt, 2005). Extrapolating these reductions in turnover to cost savings, the total amount saved in this demonstration across all organizations is estimated at $283,200—an average of $56,640 per agency.

Cost-Effectiveness

Assessing the cost of the curriculum investment, the total number of learners engaged in the training program, and the number of completed hours of training, it is possible to report cost-effectiveness. For this demonstration project, the total investment from the North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities was $266,667; the total number of learners was 2,689; and the total number of completed training hours was 158,108. This comes out to an average cost of $99.17 per learner and $1.69 investment per completed hour of training. This cost per hour for CDS is considerably less than the cost of classroom training.

Recommendations

As the CDS continues to play a role in improving DSP and organizational outcomes in North Carolina it is important to consider a number of strategies that may provide greater opportunities. First and foremost, it would be beneficial to align CDS competencies and learning objectives with statewide cross-sector competencies being developed in the state. Such alignment should be shared with DSPs and providers across the state to ensure they are aware of the ability of the CDS to address these state requirements. Additionally, expanded access to the CDS is necessary to ensure all DSPs have the opportunity to obtain quality training. For this to occur it is necessary to provide access to more private and public providers. Additionally, it would be beneficial for the state and entities within the state to consider collaborative and group purchasing options as mechanism to increase its use. Finally, it is imperative that further evaluation of CDS be pursued as mechanism for continual improvement and assessment.

Full report available at: http://directcourseonline.com/directsupport/files/2011/09/nc_demoreport.pdf

References
Larson, S.A. & Hewitt, A. (2005). S*taff recruitment, retention and training for community human service organizations*. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing Company.

North Carolina Department of Labor (2009). Retrieved April 1, 2010. http://www.bls.gov/oes.