**Expanding the Career Path to Direct Support Professional: Leveraging the Workforce Crisis to re-envision Supports to Individuals with IDD**

**Concept for Discussion**

The Need:

By all reports, the work of the DSP is among the top four jobs in demand, and that demand has no indication of slowing or shrinking. As individuals choose to live, work, and participate in everyday lives in smaller settings and with fewer people, the number of staffs required to support the same number of people increases significantly. Individuals with IDD are living longer (as is the case in the general population) and complexity of care needs are increasing significantly.

The Challenge:

BLS has reported the decreasing number of people in the workforce. Unemployment is at a record low in many locations across Ohio. Entry requirements for the DSP job are stringent which further shrinks the potential candidate pool. DSP work is challenging: physically, mentally, financially. Reimbursement rates have not kept up with increased cost of living and continue to fall behind every year. Increases in state minimum wage result in further wage compression ensuring that without working significant amounts of overtime or maintaining multiple jobs, DSP workforce remains within the federal poverty level with little hope of escape. Overtime costs are crushing provider agencies while staff turnover continues to spiral. According to the recently published Case for Inclusion report, 88% of Ohio DSP’s leave their jobs due to pay and inability to support their family. Staff vacancy rates remain in the double-digits for most providers.

The Opportunity:

Routinely, provider agencies have creatively pursued non-traditional workers to help fill the need. One workforce that has remained out of reach, due to Ohio rules and regulations, are people who have not earned their High School diploma or GED and those under the age of 18.

In a December, 2018 report from The Center for Community Solutions, it was reported that “an estimated 21,000 youth were in the disengaged youth category in 2012 – 2016”. Further, “one out of seven Cuyahoga County residents between ages 16-24 are neither in school nor employed.” However, “many have clear aspirations for a future but no path to get there…”. The Support Assistant position may be a path to a productive future, encourage re-engagement with school, while filling an important need in the IDD community.

There is recognition that the DSP job is complex, challenging, requires maturity, independent thinking, literacy, and integrity. This very fact has created a barrier to including those without HS diploma or GED from routine consideration for employment. While it is generally accepted that possessing a HS diploma or GED does not guarantee the demonstration of the above needed skills, regrettably, a broad-brush approach to assessing the potential value of those without HS diploma and GED has been accepted. Likewise, while the DSP job demands a level of maturity and benefits from life experiences, it is an overstatement to assume that every important duty needed to be performed or all interactions with people served, require the same skills and abilities. Much has been written about the benefits to all participants of inter-generational experiences. Many tasks need to be completed that can be accomplished with acceptable competence, without full certification as a DSP.

The Re-envisioning of Supports:

Work needs to be done to differentiate between the work that must be completed by a DSP and that which can be accomplished by a vetted and trained Support Assistant. The attached chart suggests that many necessary and important tasks can be completed by a staff person who has not earned their HS diploma or GED and is 16+ years old. This is an opportunity to engage an excluded workforce, under certain circumstances and with certain restrictions, to both meet the current, urgent workforce need and to engage high school students, and others, who want a job in the IDD profession and perhaps inspire for them a career path they had not considered. Safeguards can be put in place that pose no inherent greater risk to those served than continuing with an exhausted and overworked workforce or understaffed settings.

The DSP job isn’t diluted or diminished by this consideration. Instead, it is respected and recognized for the professional and complex work it truly is and adding to the care mix another element. This is not unlike the nursing profession with RN’s, LPN’s, nurse aides – each with distinct roles and professional restrictions, depending on credential earned.