



2021 Direct Service Workers Staff Stability Survey Descriptive Analysis

Findings from the National Core Indicators® Pilot Survey of Washington State Agencies

Katherine Bittinger, PhD • Jacqueline Lopez, MA, MHA

This report is a collaboration between the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) and Aging and Long-Term Support Services Administration (AL TSA) and presents the results of the project from its pilot year. Contents of this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by DSHS, AL TSA, or Advancing States.

IN FALL of 2022, the National Core Indicators® Aging and Disability (NCI-AD) organization administered a pilot survey on behalf of Washington state to gather information on the Direct Service Workers (DSW) workforce in the state. Known as the Staff Stability Survey,¹ its purpose was to identify workforce challenges among agencies who employ DSWs whose primary job responsibility is to provide care and support to the aging and disabled (AD) population. Lessons learned from the 2022 pilot year will be applied to the 2023 survey launch. Descriptive analyses of the pilot survey identified a few key themes, despite receiving a low response rate among eligible agencies in Washington. It is important to note that the results described here are not generalizable beyond the agencies who responded to the survey, given the survey's low response rate. This report provides a descriptive profile of the responding agencies, highlights key themes from the substantive sections of the pilot survey, and summarizes challenges in implementing the survey in Washington.

Key Themes and Challenges

1. There were considerable challenges in implementing the pilot survey in Washington.

- Washington had the lowest response rate and highest margin of error among the five states surveyed. Survey respondents indicated that the length of the survey and the depth of information requested posed a barrier to completing the survey.

2. Benefits provided to DSWs, including paid time off and health care insurance, varied greatly across agencies.

- While all responding agencies provided at least one type of benefit to full time DSWs, some responding agencies provided several benefits, including health care insurance, paid time off, and retirement plans, while other responding agencies provided few benefits. A third of responding agencies did not provide employer-sponsored health (medical) insurance coverage to all DSWs or paid time off to all DSWs.

3. Most agencies used multiple recruitment and retention strategies to retain current DSW staff.

- About two-thirds of the agencies had some form of a recruitment incentive program that offered a pay incentive or referral bonus when current DSW staff bring in new recruits. Most agencies also reported using at least one other recruitment or retention strategy.

¹ For more information on the Staff Stability Survey, visit: <https://legacy.nationalcoreindicators.org/staff-stability-survey/>.

NCI[®]-AD Staff Stability Survey

The NCI[®]-AD Staff Stability Survey Pilot project is a collaborative effort among ADvancing States, Human Services Research Institute (HSRI), and the states who participated in the pilot survey. The purpose of the survey is to collect data about the quality and stability of the DSW workforce serving older adults and individuals with physical disabilities. Pilot surveys were sent by NCI[®]-AD to eligible agencies in Colorado, Indiana, Missouri, Washington, and Wisconsin². Eligible agencies in Washington were defined as organizations having received Medicaid and Home and Community Based Services waiver funding in 2021. The survey focused on information about DSWs supporting the AD population who were employed between January 1, 2021, and December 31, 2021.

The pilot survey included 91 questions and was organized into several sections:

- Agency profile, including questions on the types of services offered and number and demographics of DSWs employed by the agency (17 questions).
- Payroll and benefits data, including the number and tenure of DSWs, compensation, bonuses and overtime, and available benefits, as well as recruitment and retention (49 questions).
- Information on frontline supervisors (7 questions).
- Information on emergency and disaster planning (2 questions).
- COVID-19 response (13 questions).
- An open comment/follow-up section (3 questions).

NCI[®]-AD distributed the surveys to eligible agencies via a secure access portal with individualized access to protect confidentiality. The survey was open for responses between September 6, 2022, and November 14, 2022, in Washington. Originally, the survey was to close for all states on October 31, 2022. However, due to the low response rate, the survey end date was extended for Washington agencies through November 14, 2022. No additional responses were received between November 1, 2022, and November 14, 2022.

While Washington had the largest number of eligible agencies, it had the lowest response rate of 35 respondents out of 3,156 potential agencies (see Table 1). In addition, the margin of error for Washington was considerably higher than for other states and far exceeded the NCI[®]-AD preferred 5 percent margin of error. Having a high margin of error is a strong indicator that the responses gathered in the survey may not reflect the experiences of the broader population. The low response rate and high margin of error indicate that the responses gathered in the survey should not be generalized to the broader population of eligible agencies in Washington.

TABLE 1.

2021 Staff Stability Survey (Pilot) Response Rate and Margin of Error

State	Eligible Agencies	Completed Surveys	Percent Completion	Margin of Error
Colorado	407	99	24.3%	8.6%
Indiana	210	76	36.2%	9.0%
Missouri	1,159	185	16.0%	6.6%
Washington	3,156	35	1.1%	16.5%
Wisconsin	2,322	235	10.1%	6.1%

² Missouri and Wisconsin provided a financial incentive to agencies who completed the survey. The other three states did not.

Descriptive Profile of Responding Agencies

Of the 35 agencies in Washington state that responded to the survey, all respondents had DSWs on their payroll and were in continuous operations for at least 6 months in CY 2021. Twenty-three of the responding agencies provide services only to the AD population, 11 support the AD population and other populations, and one agency chose not to respond to any questions in this section. Most agencies only offered one type of support (see Table 2).

TABLE 2.

Type of Support Provided by Responding Agencies

Type of Support	Number of Agencies Providing Type of Support
Residential Only	22
In-Home Only	0
Non-Residential Only	2
Residential and In-Home	3
Residential and Non-Residential	3
In-Home and Non-Residential	1
In-Home, Residential, and Non-Residential	4

The number of people served per month by the responding agencies is summarized in Table 3 below. The majority of responding agencies, regardless of type of support, served fewer than ten people. Even so, the responding agencies served approximately 4,000 people in the AD population each month during CY 2021. However, 11 of the responding agencies indicated that they stopped accepting referrals due to staffing issues during CY 2021. It is unknown whether this is tied to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

TABLE 3.

Number of People Served per Month by Type of Support Provided in CY 2021

Type of Support*	Number of people served per month					
	1-10	11-20	21-99	100-499	500-999	1000+
Residential	26	1	1	4	0	0
In-Home	7	0	0	1	1	1
Non-Residential	8	0	0	0	0	0

*Agencies may provide more than one type of support.

Agencies were asked to report on the demographic characteristics of their full time DSW staff and DSW supervisors as of December 31, 2021. The reported demographic characteristics are based on the responses of only 35 participating agencies who completed the pilot survey. Note that these numbers may not be representative of the demographic characteristics of the entire population of eligible agencies in Washington state (N=3,156 agencies). In addition, even among the 35 respondent agencies, the diversity of DSWs within agencies varied, with some agencies having greater diversity than others. Table 4 below summarizes the race and ethnicity and gender of DSWs based on the categories provided in the survey. The demographics of the 2020 working age population (ages 15 to 64 years old) in Washington is provided as a comparison.

Out of the 35 total agencies who responded to the NCI-AD survey, 33 submitted race and ethnicity information for DSW staff; one agency did not have DSW staff in December 2021 and another did not

respond to the survey question. Of those who responded, four large agencies and one small agency reported that they did not have race and ethnicity data available for part or all their DSW staff, resulting in a significant number of DSW staff who were identified as having an unknown race and ethnicity (n=511). Of the 31 participating agencies who provided race and ethnicity information for DSW supervisors, four agencies indicated that race and ethnicity information was unknown.

Both DSW staff and DSW supervisors are comprised predominantly of those who identify as White (33 percent), Black or African American (29 percent), or Hispanic or Latino (22 percent). However, DSW supervisors were predominantly White (58 percent) with a considerably smaller proportion of BIPOC supervisors. For example, while 13 percent of the DSW staff are identified as Asian, only 5 percent of DSW supervisors are identified as Asian. In addition, we compared the reported demographics of DSW staff and DSW supervisors with the 2020 estimates of the demographics for the Washington working age population (individuals ages 15 to 64). In general, individuals who are identified as BIPOC are overrepresented among DSW staff, particularly those identified as Asian, Black or African American, or Hispanic or Latino.

TABLE 4.

Reported Demographics of DSW Staff Employed as of December 2021 Compared to 2020 Washington Work Age Population Demographics

Demographics	DSW Staff	DSW Supervisor	Working Age Population [†]
Race/Ethnicity*			
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%	1%	2%
Asian	13%	5%	11%
Black or African American	29%	19%	5%
Hispanic or Latino	22%	17%	13%
Pacific Islander	2%	1%	1%
White	33%	58%	78%
More than one race/ethnicity	1%	0%	4%
Gender**			
Male	13%	13%	51%
Female	87%	87%	49%
Non-Binary	0%	0%	n/a

[†] Based on 2020 OFM Small Area Demographic Estimates of the working age population (ages 15 to 64 years old) in Washington. As of publication, 2020 is the most recent year available.

* Based on responses from 33 out of 35 total participating agencies for DSW staff and from 31 out of 35 total participating agencies for DSW Supervisors.

** Based on responses from 32 out of 35 total participating agencies for DSW staff and from 31 out of 35 total participating agencies for DSW Supervisors.

For gender demographics of DSWs, both DSW staff and DSW supervisors are comprised predominantly of those who identify as female (87 percent). Out of the 35 total agencies who responded to the NCI-AD survey, 32 submitted gender information for DSW staff; One agency reported having zero DSW staff as of December 2021 and two others were missing data. As with race and ethnicity data, two large agencies indicated that they did not have gender data available for DSW staff (n=425). Of the 31 participating agencies who provided gender identity information for DSW supervisors, nine reported having zero DSW supervisors as of December 2021 and four agencies were missing data.

Agencies were also asked about the tenure of their full-time DSW staff. DSW tenure varied depending on agency size, in that agencies with more DSWs tended to have a more even distribution of DSW tenure. For example, the one larger responding agency (serving more than 100 people per month) had 50 DSWs who had worked for the agency less than 6 month, 64 DSWs who had worked for 6-12 months, 99 DSWs who had worked for 12-24 months, 41 DSWs who worked for 24-36 months, and 122 DSWs who had worked for more than 36 months. Conversely, smaller agencies (serving fewer than 20 people per month) tended to have concentrated tenure levels. One smaller responding agency had 5 DSWs who had worked for the agency for less than 6 months, 8 DSWs who had worked for the agency for 6-12 months, and no DSWs who had worked for more than 12 months. Another smaller responding agency had only two DSWs who had both worked for more than 36 months.

Discussion of Key Themes

Key themes from each substantive section of the survey are summarized below. As previously noted, the themes discussed below are only applicable to the agencies who responded to the survey and should not be generalized to the broader population of eligible agencies in Washington state.

Benefits and Compensation (Salary and Bonuses)

The average hourly starting salary and range of hourly starting salaries for DSWs is consistent regardless of the type of support provided (see Table 5). Only two agencies reported pay differences for individuals who can communicate in languages other than English. About a third of the responding agencies reported giving wage bonuses to DSWs in 2021 (n=10) with the average bonus amount reported ranging between \$50 to \$500.

TABLE 5.

Average Hourly Starting Salary by Type of Support Provided in CY 2021

Type of Support	Average Hourly Starting Salary	Hourly Starting Salary Range
Residential (n=23)	\$16.83	\$13.50 - \$21.00
In-Home (n=19)	\$16.89	\$13.50 - \$20.00
Non-Residential (n=14)	\$16.82	\$13.49 - \$20.00

While the average hourly starting salary was largely consistent, the benefits provided to DSWs varied greatly (see Table 6). While all responding agencies provided some form of benefit to full time DSWs, the type of and number of benefits varied greatly.

Employer-sponsored retirement plans were the most frequently reported type of benefit (n=27), followed closely by vision coverage (n=26), dental coverage (n=25), health (medical) insurance coverage (n=22), and paid time off (n=22). Other benefits were offered by fewer than five of the responding agencies, such as employer-paid job-related training, health incentive programs (such as reduced cost gym memberships and smoking cessation incentives), childcare benefits, and transportation benefits. This pattern is consistent when looking at the type of benefits offered by type of support provided.

It is important to note that in Washington, many DSWs have a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) via a union that includes requirements to provide health care and retirement benefits. It is unknown how many of the responding agencies employed DSWs under a CBA. Based on how the survey questions were structured, responding agencies may have answered “yes” to benefit related questions if they employed DSWs under a CBA even if non-CBA DSWs were not offered the same benefits.

TABLE 6.

Type of Benefit Provided in CY 2021 by Type of Support Provided

Type of Benefit Provided to Full-Time Direct Service Workers	Agencies* (n=35)	Type of Support Provided**		
		Residential (n=32)	In-Home (n=10)	Non-Residential (n=8)
Paid time off	22	19	6	2
Health (medical) insurance coverage	22	21	6	5
Dental coverage	25	24	6	5
Vision coverage	26	25	6	5
Employer-sponsored retirement plan	27	25	7	4
Employer-sponsored disability insurance	16	14	5	4
Employer-paid job-related training	4	3	1	1
Health incentive programs (gyms, smoking cessation incentives, etc.)	4	3	2	2
Childcare benefits	3	3	2	2
Flexible Spending Accounts	3	2	1	0
Life insurance	2	2	0	0
Transportation benefits (bus pass, parking, carpooling)	1	1	0	0

* Agencies may provide more than one type of benefit.

** Agencies may provide more than one type of support and are included in the counts for each type of support provided. For example, if an agency provides both in-home and residential supports, they are included in both categories.

Recruitment and Retention Strategies

Responding agencies were asked a series of questions about their recruitment and retention strategies. About two-thirds of the agencies had some form of a recruitment incentive program (n=25) that offered a pay incentive or referral bonus when current DSW staff bring in new recruits. Agencies were also asked to report on their use of a set of 12 recruitment and retention strategies. Table 7 describes the use of the specified strategies.

Six agencies used only one of the listed strategies. Ten agencies used between two and four of the listed strategies. Nine agencies used between five and seven strategies. And two agencies used eight or more of the listed strategies. While all responding agencies used at least one of the listed recruitment strategies, some strategies were more popular than others. For example, 23 of the responding agencies indicated that they provide bonuses, stipends, or raises to DSWs as they complete key stages of a credentialing process or upon completion of the credentialing process. Conversely, no agencies indicated they used a realistic job preview to provide information about the job duties, both positive and negative, from the perspective of people who do the work.

Other frequently used strategies include providing a sign-on bonus for new hires (n=19) and using a DSW career ladder to retain workers in DSW roles (n=17). Less frequently used strategies include supporting staff to get credentialed through a state or nationally recognized professional organization (n=3) and engaging with high schools and/or local colleges or universities for recruitment purposes (n=4).

TABLE 7.

Recruitment and Retention Strategies Reported Used in CY 2021

Recruitment and Retention Strategies	Number of Agencies*
Provide bonuses, stipends, or raises to DSWs as they complete key stages of a credentialing process or upon completion of the credentialing process	23
Provide sign-on bonus	19
Use a DSW ladder to retain workers in DSW roles	17
Include DSWs in agency governance	11
Implement employment engagement surveys to assess DSW satisfaction and experience working for the agency	9
Offer and/or participate in apprenticeship programs for recruitment purposes	8
Employee recognition programs	6
Engage with high schools and/or local colleges/universities for recruitment purposes	4
Support staff to get credentialed through a state or nationally recognized professional organization	3
Require training for DSWs above and beyond those trainings required by state regulations	3
Provide training on a Code of Ethics	2
Realistic job preview (provides accurate information about the job duties, both positive and negative, from the perspective of people who do the work)	0

*Agencies may use more than one type of strategy

Survey Limitations

There are several major limitations to this descriptive analysis, including the response rate, breakoff rate (see below), question non-response and time to complete the survey. Response rate was discussed above along with Table 1 and is a major limitation of this report as the survey response rate was low (1.11 percent) with a high margin of error. Three other limitations are discussed further here.

The pilot survey also had a high breakoff rate. A breakoff occurs when a respondent starts but does not complete the survey (Lavrakas, 2008). A total of 101 agencies started the pilot survey, but only 35 finished the survey for a breakoff rate³ of 65 percent. While breakoffs are fairly common in web surveys (Chen et al., 2022), breakoff rates are usually less than 15 percent (Liu and Wronski, 2018). A high survey breakoff rate can result in biased results if the agencies who completed the survey differ from those who breakoff. As such, the themes identified in this report cannot be generalized to the broader population of eligible agencies.

Even among those who submitted a completed survey, there was considerable non-response on some questions within the survey. Detail-oriented survey questions, such as those about specific types of benefits, had a high non-response rate. In addition, surveys tended to be more complete for larger facilities than for smaller facilities, suggesting that smaller agencies may not have had easy access to the detailed information required for responding to the survey. This is reflected in the large numbers of demographic data reported as unknown for both race and ethnicity and gender. Furthermore, the difficulty with accessing detailed data is supported by comments provided by responding agencies at the end of the survey. One respondent noted that they *"had trouble getting the payroll info[rmat]ion because they [sic] payroll company didn't have the time to get the info[rmat]ion..."*.

³ The breakoff rate is calculated by dividing the number of uncompleted surveys by the total number of started surveys. For this survey, there were 66 uncompleted surveys out of 101 started surveys, resulting in a breakoff rate of 65.3 percent.

Survey respondents identified the time to complete the survey as a limitation. Responding agencies were asked how long it took them to complete the survey. Based on respondent answers, the survey took an average of 168 minutes to complete. This is twice as long as predicted by NCI®-AD. In addition, responding agencies were given the opportunity to provide any comments they have about the survey. Of the 11 agencies who provided responses, nine agencies noted that the length of the survey and/or the depth of information requested posed a challenge to completing the survey. One respondent noted that even though they were able to provide the information, *“this is a very detailed request...”*.

Future versions of this survey may want to consider refining the number of survey questions to reduce the burden on responding agencies.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges in survey implementation, a few key themes emerged. The number and type of benefits provided to full-time DSWs varied greatly with some responding agencies providing several benefits, including health care insurance, paid time off, and retirement plans and other providing minimal benefits. About two-thirds of the agencies had some form of a recruitment incentive program that offered a pay incentive or referral bonus when current DSW staff bring in new recruits, and most agencies reported using at least one other recruitment or retention strategy. While these and other themes from this survey cannot be generalized to the broader population of Washington agencies, they provide insight into areas for further study. Follow-up surveys or other analyses could identify whether these themes are consistent across all Washington agencies that employ DSWs. Identifying strengths and areas for improvement among agencies with a DSW workforce serving older adults and individuals with physical disabilities will continue to be important. As one respondent said: *“[Whether] it is [a] small scale or [a] big scale operation, in the end we’re taking care of one’s life.”*

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REPORT CONTACT: Alice Huber, PhD, 360.902.0707
VISIT US AT: <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/rda>

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