

Testimony of Mia McGuire, Director of Administration – SpArc Services
House Human Services Committee
Chair Gene DiGirolamo
December 6, 2017

Good Morning and thank you for having me here today. The reason I am here today is because it is of the utmost of importance that we fix the DSP crisis -without highly trained, professional staff in these crucial roles, the quality of life for people with disabilities will suffer.

I work for SpArc Services, a provider organization that supports nearly 500 individuals with intellectual disabilities and autism. We are located in North Philadelphia and support people within our own neighborhood and the entire southeast region.

To best serve the participants in our programs, SpArc Services employs 80 direct support professionals (DSP). Each DSP is responsible for anywhere from one to 15 people at a given time and are responsible for providing support services for individuals across all of our programs.

The job of the DSP is multi-faceted – not only are DSPs responsible for providing a safe environment for the people they support, but they are also charged with knowing and understanding the individual health care needs, dietary restrictions, medication, risk factors, personal care needs, behavioral concerns and triggers of the people they support. And if that isn't enough, DSP's also implement the strategies that have been developed to help people obtain their outcomes and goals, in multiple settings, and within the greater community.

The job of the DSP does not end when the participants goes home, as DSP's are also responsible for reporting on daily progress of goals, participating in meetings for the people they support, and the multitude of training requirements to ensure that people in these roles feel knowledgeable and confident in their abilities.

As a provider who recruits and needs to retain qualified staff to continue providing supports to the participants in our programs, the challenge to maintain staff seems insurmountable, primarily due to the salary, which is tied to the rates set forth by the state. It is these rates, based on state appropriations, that pays poverty level wages in our system. In addition, the people who live and work in Philadelphia have an added burden due to higher cost of housing, basic necessities, and an added city wage tax. The job responsibilities for the DSP position are great and it is unfortunate that the salary is low and inequitable to the value they add to the lives of so many.

All of these factors contribute to the high turnover rate that plague this role and the industry as a whole. We can talk about the cost that this has on the organization, but the highest cost is the affect that it has on the people who are supported. The keystone to health and safety for individuals with disabilities is consistency: and consistency of staffing is of the utmost importance.

I've seen the agony first hand when a DSP has to make a decision between staying at a job they love and supporting people they care for so that they can provide for their families. The true losers of this occurrence are the individuals they support – It is unfortunate that this is a regular occurrence and happens so often that the people we support, their families, and their teams of support professionals

have become accustomed to progress and regression due to changes in staff. This shouldn't be the case.

I could go on and on about the challenges that DSPs face within this field and when they leave to go home, but I think it's more important for you to hear about that first hand from someone who lives it every day. Samira Gray is one of the dedicated DSP staff who works at SpArc.