

**North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services:  
DMH/DD/SUS Direct Support Professional (DSP) Workforce Plan<sup>1</sup>**

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NCDHS/DMH/DD/SUS

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## Document Purpose

The State of North Carolina is confronting a critical shortage of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) that significantly impacts the availability and quality of in-home and community-based services for individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD). This DSP Workforce Plan captures the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services' (NCDHHS or the Department) comprehensive, multi-year effort to address the DSP Workforce shortage and reaffirms NCDHHS' commitment to DSPs and the essential services they provide to people with I/DD.

The DSP Workforce Plan was developed to guide the use of Behavioral Health Investment Funds allocated by the General Assembly in the 2023-2025 biennium budget<sup>2</sup> and is intended to address related requirements of the Consent Order associated with *Samantha R., et al. v North Carolina* and the NC Department of Health and Human Services (the *Samantha R. Case*). This is a periodic update to the DSP Workforce Plan.

The DSP Workforce Plan was originally published in June 2024, as part of the Consent Order as a result of a 2017 lawsuit that was filed by Disability Rights North Carolina (DRNC), on behalf of Samantha R. and others, challenging the availability of home and community-based services for people with I/DD that would enable them to live in their communities. While an update was not specifically outlined in the Consent Order, this update serves as the Department's commitment to the workforce and stakeholders to keep them informed on the programs that have been undertaken. The Department intends to periodically update the plan as circumstances change.

## Funding Dependency

As detailed in this plan, NCDHHS has made significant investments in areas to address the stated shortages of DSPs statewide. The Department also continues to explore new opportunities for funding and partnership. While NCDHHS is invested in solving the shortage, funding availability is a factor that may prevent wide-scale implementation of planned programs. Outside of this workplan, NCDHHS continues to advocate for BH Rate increases. The programs listed in this document are pilot programs that, with time and funding, can be scaled and be implemented far beyond their pilot regions.

The intent is that this is a living document and simply provides a snapshot of the plans and programs that NCDHHS is pursuing now with the information that we have today. As NCDHHS continues to design, implement, and refine the DSP Workforce Plan, the scope of planned programs likely will change based on needs, including potentially adding new programs to help address the causes of the DSP shortage and improve the lives of North Carolinians. NCDHHS is committed to periodically updating the document and keeping stakeholders involved along the way.

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<sup>2</sup> The N.C. General Assembly passed a budget in fall 2023 that included an investment of \$835 million in behavioral health and resiliency within NCDHHS. NCDHHS allocated \$9 million for dedicated investments to address the DSP Workforce Shortage. <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/news/press-releases/2023/10/10/world-mental-health-day-nc-celebrates-historic-835m-investment-behavioral-health>.

# DSP Workforce Shortage

North Carolina continues to face a statewide shortage of DSPs that can provide quality home and community-based services to people with I/DD. The DSP shortage has been exacerbated over the last several years due to worker burnout, low wages, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, among several other factors.

While NCDHHS has taken several independent steps to address some of the underlying causes of the DSP workforce shortage, including specific efforts to increase direct care worker wages,<sup>3</sup> this DSP Workforce Plan reaffirms NCDHHS's commitment to Direct Support Professionals and the critical services they provide to people with I/DD.

## Approach

This DSP Workforce Plan details NCDHHS's multi-year plan to build a robust, high-quality DSP workforce through improved retention, strategic recruitment, and enhanced training. Assisting in that effort, the Department has adopted a framework that focuses on Educating, Employing and Elevating (the 3E's). The 3E's framework was developed to guide the overall approach and link all programs to the goal of addressing the workforce shortage. The 3E's framework's first point, **Educate**, targets increasing not only educational offerings available to DSPs, but removing the barriers to receiving those offerings. **Employ** aims to reduce the barriers that are present that prevent DSPs and employers from matching up with each other. **Elevate** targets the expansion of opportunities, professionalization of the field and development of a career ladder for DSPs to advance in their careers.

This workplan aligns with the NCDHHS Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services (DMH/DD/SUS) Strategic Plan for 2024–2029,<sup>4</sup> Goal 4.2: Strengthen DSP Workforce: Build a well-trained and supported DSP workforce. Additional detail on each of the launched and planned programs is included in the following pages.

As depicted in Figure 1 below, the programs<sup>5</sup> are aligned to the overarching objective of mitigating the DSP Workforce shortage in NC and designed to improve key outcomes, including increasing the Community Living Support (CLS) utilization rate, that ultimately lead to better service delivery to people with I/DD.

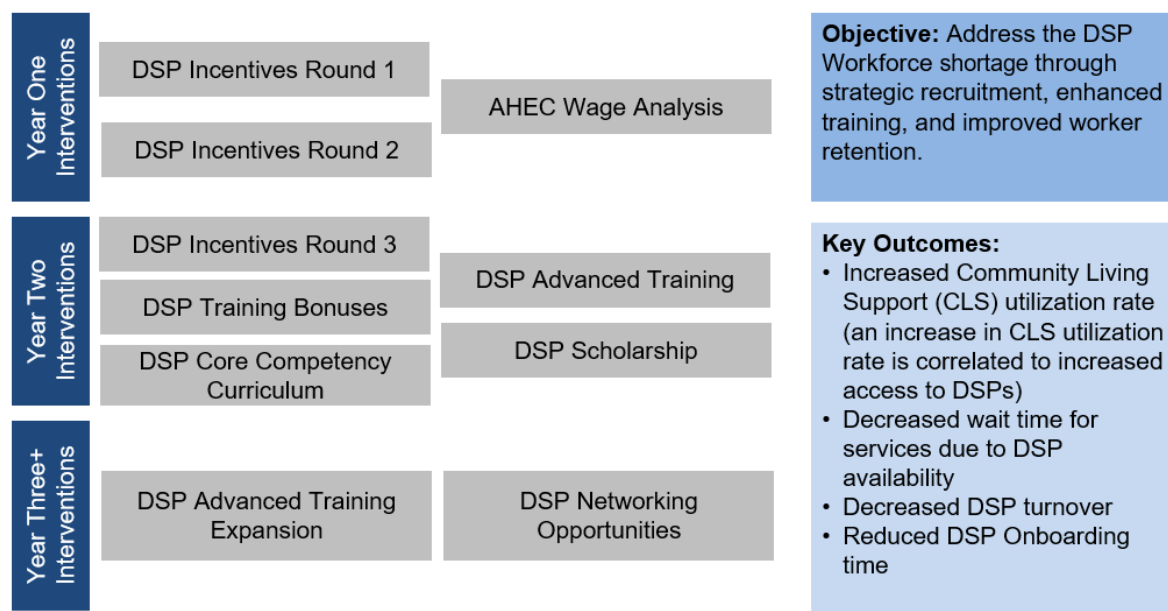
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<sup>3</sup> Direct Care Worker Wage Increase Initiatives. <https://medicaid.ncdhhs.gov/DCW-Initiative#PreviousDCWWageIncreaseInitiatives-3037>

<sup>4</sup> North Carolina Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services Strategic Plan for 2024-2029: North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services June 3, 2024. <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/draft-dmhddsus-strategic-plan-june-2024/open>

<sup>5</sup> Planned initiatives may change, including additions and/or deletions, as NCDHHS continues to design, implement, and refine the DSP Workforce Plan.

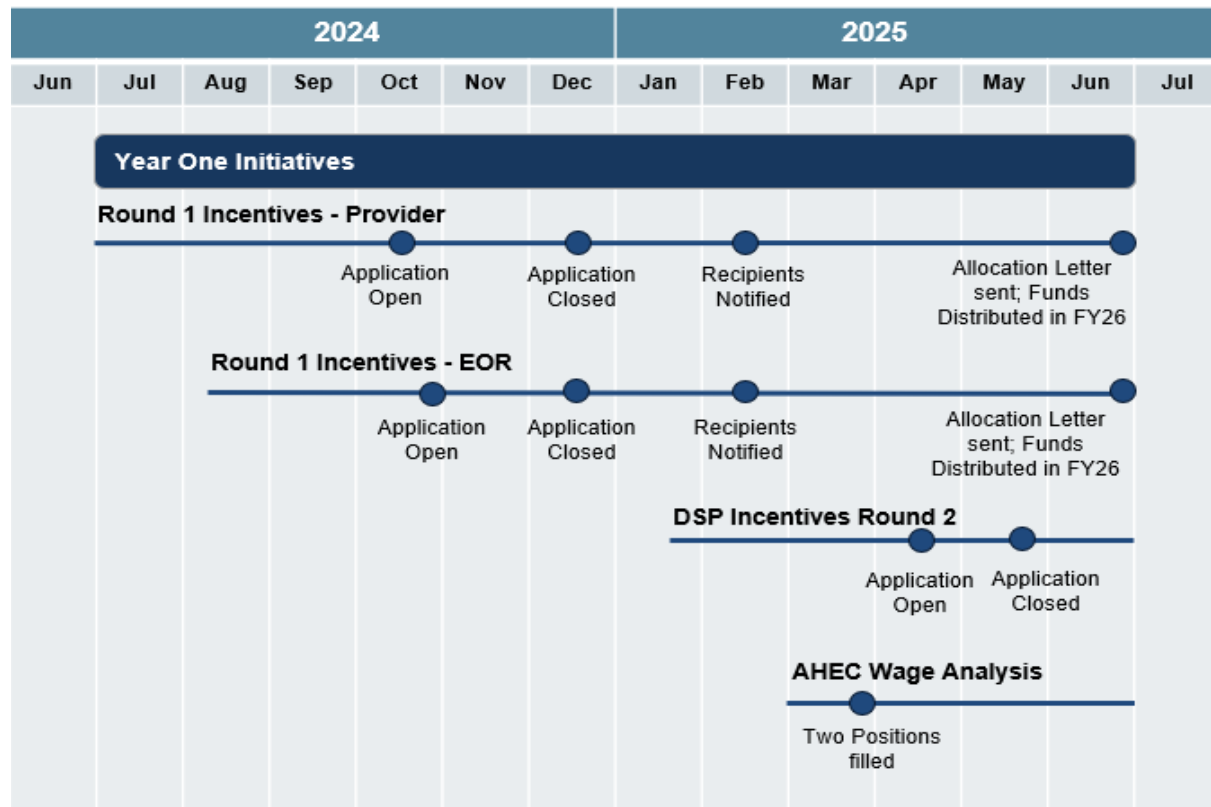
Figure 1. DSP Workforce Plan – Framework



## Anticipated Timeline

Upon the publication of this revised workforce plan, NCDHHS has programs in various stages of development meant to target the workforce. At this time NCDHHS has successfully launched the first and second rounds of DSP Recruitment & Retention Incentives (described below) targeting DSPs that are delivering I/DD services in the field. Additionally, NCDHHS is in the Design Phase of the other programs. NCDHHS will track Key Performance Indicators/Metrics for each program, refine goals and objectives using these measures, and revise the programs throughout the Implementation Phase of the project. In addition to metrics, NCDHHS has formed several workgroups with community partners, comprised of working DSPs and other subject matter experts who provide feedback during every stage of the Workforce Plan. Figure(s) 2-4 below illustrate the timelines of the DSP Workforce Plan over a three-year period, beginning in July of 2024.

Figure 2. DSP Workforce Plan Year One – July 1, 2024, to June 30, 2025



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Figure 3. DSP Workforce Plan Year Two – July 1, 2025, to June 30, 2026

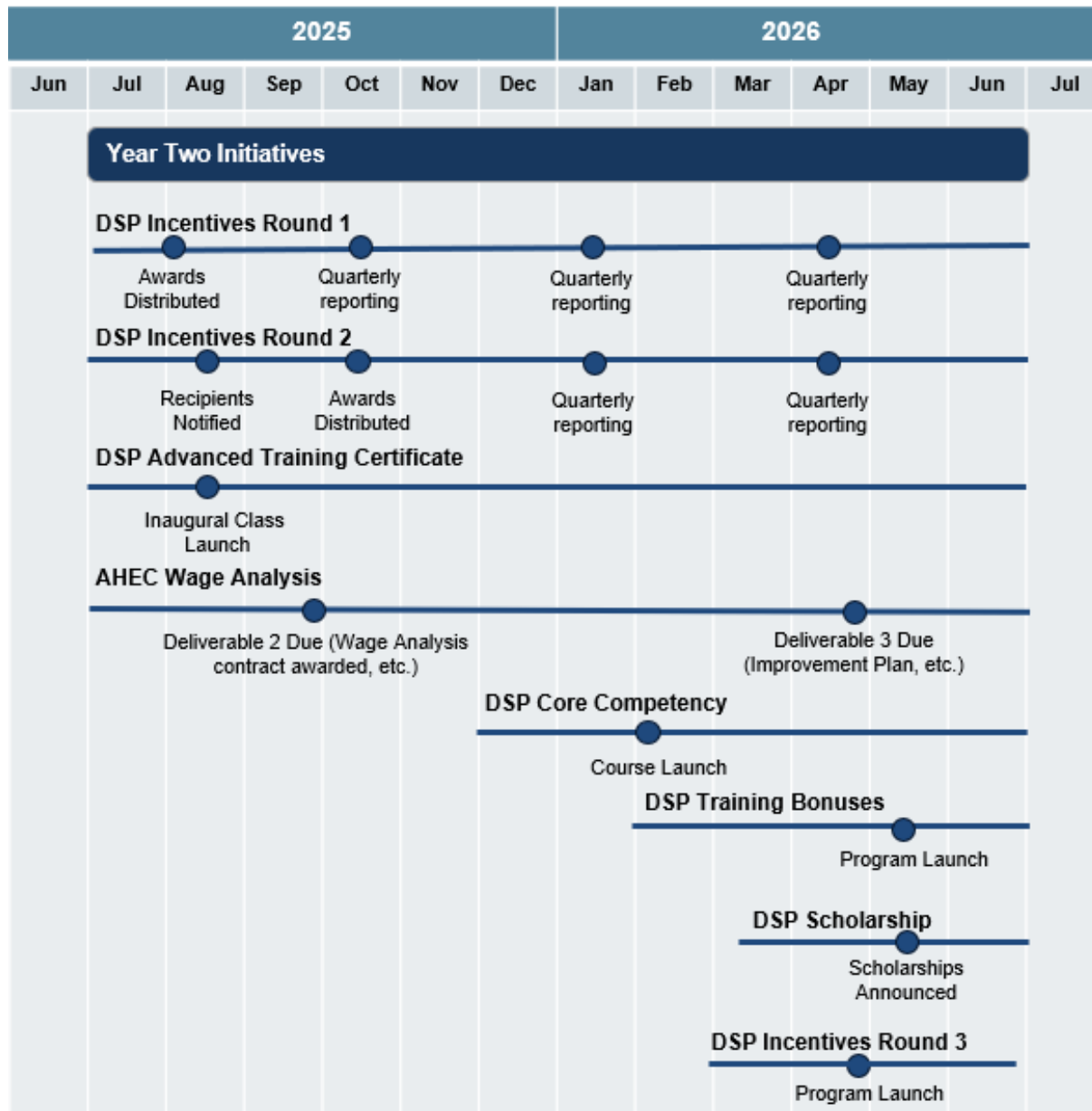
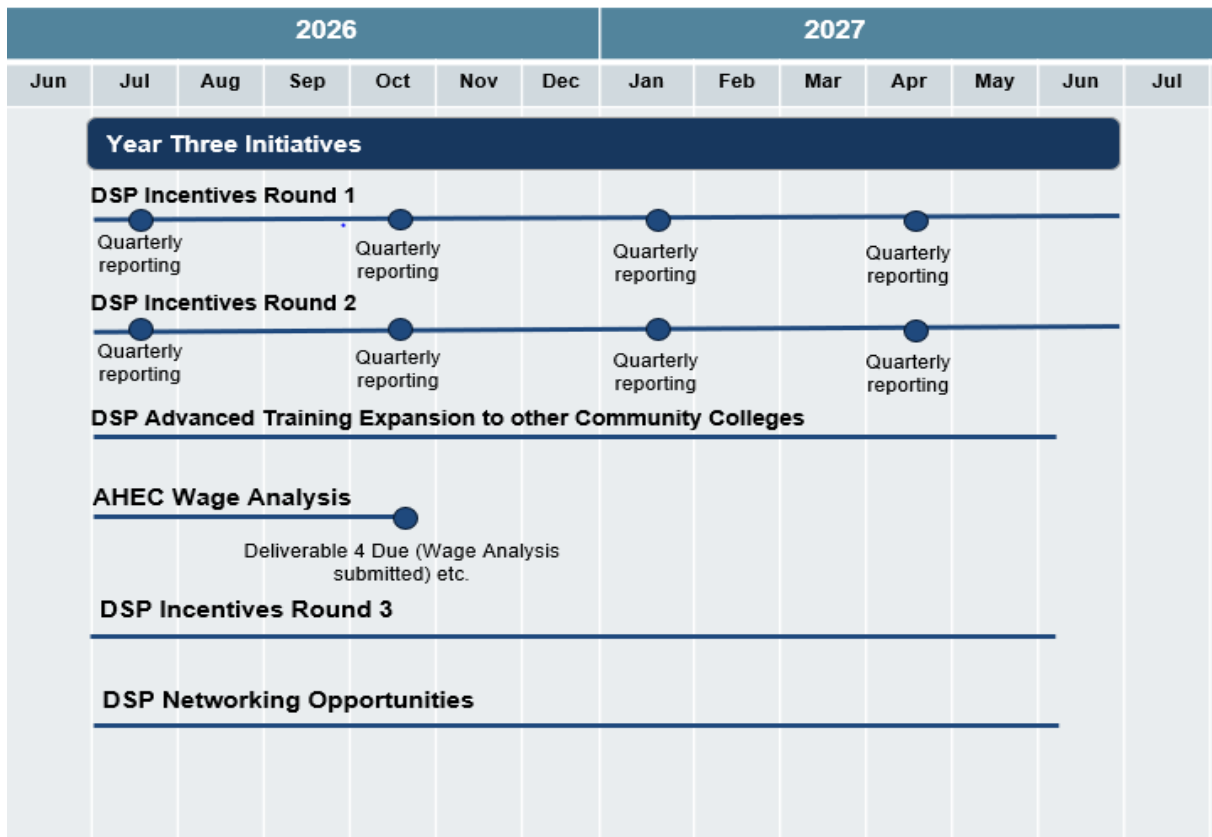


Figure 4. DSP Workforce Plan Year Three – July 1, 2026, to Beyond



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# DSP Workforce Plan

## Design Background

In 2023, a NCDHHS cross-divisional DSP Workgroup was established to develop programs to address the DSP Workforce shortage in the State of North Carolina and meet the requirements of the Samantha R. Consent Order. The Workgroup is comprised of subject matter experts, consultants, and other industry experts who have been collaborating weekly on designing this Workplan. Since the Workgroup's launch it has engaged with community members, conducted research and met with many stakeholders to gather information from concerned groups.

Recognizing the pressing importance of nurturing a robust and resilient caregiver workforce, NCDHHS partnered with the NC Department of Commerce to create a Caregiving Workforce Strategic Leadership Council to build a first-in-class caregiving workforce. The Caregiving Workforce Strategic Leadership Council in January 2024, published an investigative study and strategic roadmap, *Investing in North Carolina's Caregiving Workforce: Recommendations to strengthen North Carolina's nursing, direct care, and behavioral health workforce* (the Caregiving Workforce Report)<sup>6</sup> that outlined context, best practices, and recommendations to address the direct care workforce shortage in North Carolina.

As an initial step in the Design Phase, NCDHHS evaluated recommendations and best practices from the Caregiving Workforce Report and the NC AHEC Report to determine actionable steps to address the DSP Training and Credentialing Needs. NC AHEC outlined an implementation support plan for developing a credentialing system for direct care workers in all settings, including home- and community-based services, that contains 6 elements:

1. Implement an umbrella system for credentialing DCWs that incorporates new and existing training options.
2. Adopt common core competencies for all direct care workers.
3. Ensure training is accessible for all workers, including paid training time.
4. Develop infrastructure for the administration and oversight of credentialing.
5. Connect competency attainment with wage and rate differentials.
6. Provide additional wraparound support services to direct care workers.

## Community Engagement

A key component of this workplan is Community Engagement, which collectively refers to not only the cross-functional workgroups that have met to support planning and execution of the DSP Workforce Plan, but the other efforts taken by the Department to engage with stakeholders, specifically DSPs.

The workgroups include representation from a variety of stakeholders including DSPs, Local Management Entities/Managed Care Organizations (LME/MCOs), people with lived experience, community members, providers, guardians, and other members of the I/DD community. The combined knowledge and experience of stakeholders is being used to help develop the programs outlined in this Workplan. Brief descriptions of each workgroup are included below:

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<sup>6</sup> Investing in North Carolina's Caregiving Workforce: Recommendations to strengthen North Carolina's nursing, direct care, and behavioral health workforce <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/investing-north-carolinas-caregiving-workforce-recommendations-strengthen-north-carolinas-nursing/download?attachment>

- **Inclusion Connects Advisory Committee (ICAC)** (Launched April 2025) – workgroup responsible for researching, recommending, and providing support/guidance for future implementation of best practices to meet the needs of people with I/DD.
- **DMH/DD/SUS Side-by-Side Webinar** (launched October 2023) – monthly DMH/DD/SUS webinar with community members on key programs.
- **Curriculum Development Group** (launched August 2024) – group of representatives from the NC Community College System that are working toward developing an Advanced Training curriculum for DSPs.

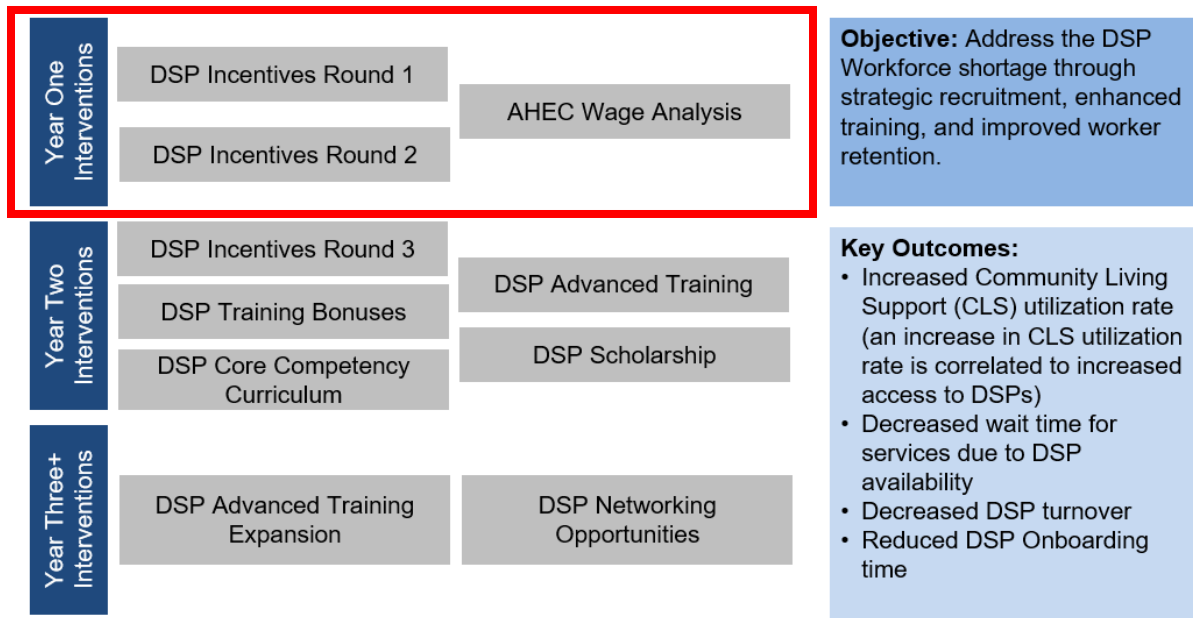
Proactive Community Engagement throughout the design and implementation of the DSP Workforce Plan has been and continues to be essential to building a workplan that acknowledges and addresses the complex needs of the community.

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## Year-One Programs (July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025)

Over the last year, NCDHHS has made significant strides to address the workforce shortage in North Carolina. Several programs have been launched that aim to address the workforce shortage at various areas in the employment pipeline. This section covers the programs that have been developed over the last year and/or have launched in the last year.

Figure 5. Year-One Programs



### DSP Recruitment and Retention Incentives (Round One)

NCDHHS has launched the DSP Recruitment and Retention Incentives program to address the high rate of turnover amongst DSPs in the workforce through improved retention, strategic recruitment, and enhanced training opportunities. This program targets agencies that hire DSPs that work specifically with the I/DD population. Incentives were open to provider agencies as well as Employers of Record (EORs). Upon the date of publication, nearly \$3 million has been allocated to these incentives.

In addition to the incentive programs, the Department is contracting with innovative organizations across the state to launch pilots of programs thought to be addressing a unique need associated with the DSP Workforce in North Carolina. The Department is currently working with four organizations to launch the pilot programs in various regions across the state. If successful, the piloting organizations will share best practices and lessons learned from the pilots to be shared with other organizations that might want to implement similar programs.

**Launch:** September 2024

**Table 1.** DSP Recruitment and Retention Incentives (Round One) Details

Objectives	Metrics
<p>NCDHHS will provide financial incentives to support DSP recruitment and retention such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Recruitment:</b> Programs to attract new DSPs through sign-on bonuses</li><li>• <b>Referral:</b> Programs that reward individuals for referring qualified DSP candidates who are successfully hired.</li><li>• <b>Retention:</b> Strategies to keep DSPs employed long-term.</li><li>• <b>Supports:</b> Resources that help DSPs stay in their roles, such as gift cards for gas or groceries, personal care, elder care, child care support, etc.</li><li>• <b>Training:</b> Educational programs that build DSP skills, including internal or external trainings, upskilling, or career advancement that goes beyond the mandatory basic trainings.</li></ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Number of provider agencies and EOR who received funding</li><li>2. Number of individual DSPs who received funds from this award</li><li>3. Specific metrics related to funded program type</li></ol> <p><b>Long-Term:</b> Awardees will provide data related to their turnover rate, their ability to hire new DSPs, and other specifics related to the program type in which they received funds. Program types included: Recruitment, Referral, Retention, Supports, and Training.</p> <p><b>Approach:</b> Awardees will be providing quarterly reporting information for two years through an evaluation process via a Microsoft Forms survey link.</p>

### DSP Recruitment and Retention Incentives (Round Two)

Through a partnership between Department divisions as well as the Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) additional funding was made available through a federal match program. NCDHHS has designed a program in compliance with federal guidelines that targets improving retention, implementing strategic recruitment programming, and enhanced training opportunities. Through the federal funding match, the total funding could as much as double, creating a greater impact on the DSPs working in the field.

**Launch:** April 2025

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**Table 2.** DSP Recruitment and Retention Incentives (Round Two) Details

Objectives	Metrics
<p>NCDHHS will provide financial incentives to support DSP recruitment and retention such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Recruitment:</b> programs to attract new DSPs through sign-on bonuses</li><li>• <b>Retention:</b> Strategies to keep DSPs employed long-term</li></ul> <p>Please note: The eligible program types for Round 2 differ from Round 1 due to updated eligibility requirements set by the Centers for Medicare &amp; Medicaid Services (CMS), including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• DSPs must have a full-time work schedule of at least 30 hours per week.</li><li>• A three-year service commitment is required.</li></ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Number of provider agencies and EOR who received funding</li><li>2. Number of individual DSPs who received funds from this award</li><li>3. Specific metrics related to funded program type</li></ol> <p><b>Long-Term:</b> Awardees will provide data related to their turnover rate, their ability to hire new DSPs, and other specifics related to the program type in which they received funds. Program types included: Recruitment and Retention.</p> <p><b>Approach:</b> Awardees will be providing quarterly reporting information for three years through an evaluation process via a Microsoft Forms survey link.</p>

### AHEC Wage Analysis

The Department has entered into a contract with the NC Area Health Education Centers (NC AHEC) to perform an analysis of wage rates, focusing on Direct Care Workers (including DSPs), among others.

**Launch:** In Progress

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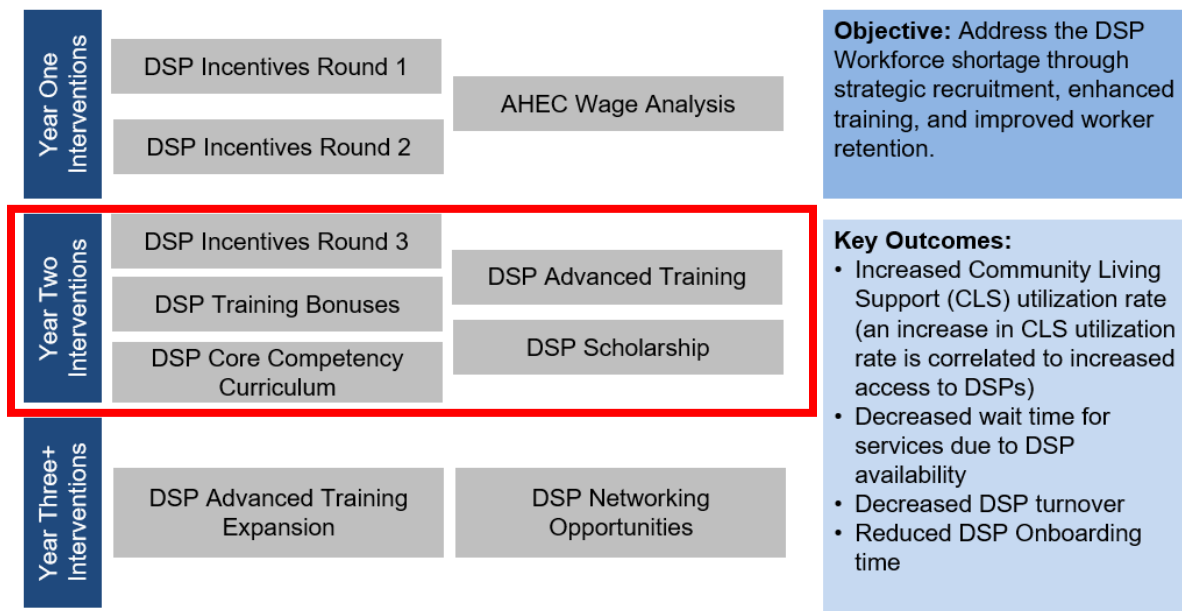
**Table 3. AHEC Wage Analysis Details**

Objectives	Metrics
<p>NC AHEC is conducting an analysis of Direct Care Worker's (DCW's) wages in the state.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Completion of a comprehensive assessment of DMHDDSUS education and training programs</li> <li>2. Develop inventory of NCDHHS-affiliated behavioral health workforce programs</li> <li>3. Develop recommended work plan to implement Caregiving Council action items</li> <li>4. Produce recommended improvement plan for NCDHHS behavioral health workforce programs</li> <li>5. Produce report on status of implementation of Caregiving Council work plan</li> <li>6. Complete comprehensive direct care worker wage rate analysis</li> <li>7. Produce draft report on implementation of Caregiving Council work plan and NCDHHS Behavioral Health workforce improvement plan on or before 9/30/2026</li> </ol> <p><b>Long-Term:</b> The goal is to strengthen North Carolina's behavioral health and direct care workforce by improving training, retention, and compensation. This work will help ensure equitable access to quality care, especially in underserved areas. Over time, it will support sustainable workforce policies and infrastructure across the state.</p> <p><b>Approach:</b> In development. The project will assess current training programs, gather input from key stakeholders, and identify gaps in the workforce system. It will also develop a statewide inventory of behavioral health initiatives and create a work plan aligned with the Caregiving Council's goals. A wage analysis and detailed reporting will guide strategic decision-making and long-term improvements.</p>

## Year-Two Programs (July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026)

Now in the second year of this Workforce Plan, NCDHHS continues to develop programs that are intended to have significant impact on DSPs and the workforce as a whole. The Department continues to research several DSP Workforce programs for implementation in year two by studying what has been enacted in other states. NCDHHS will continue to engage the community throughout the design and implementation process to ensure proposed programs lead to improved outcomes.

Figure 6. Year-Two Programs



### DSP Recruitment and Retention Incentives (Round Three)

As was described in the Year One programs, due to a partnership between Department divisions as well as the Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) additional funding was made available through a federal match program. This third round of funding was designed by NCDHHS in compliance with federal guidelines that target improving retention, implementing strategic recruitment programming, and enhanced training opportunities.

**Target Launch:** Spring 2026

**Table 4.** DSP Recruitment and Retention Incentives (Round Three) Details

Objectives	Metrics
<p>NCDHHS will provide financial incentives to support DSP recruitment and retention such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Recruitment:</b> Programs to attract new DSPs through sign-on bonuses</li><li>• <b>Retention:</b> Strategies to keep DSPs employed long-term</li><li>• <b>Training:</b> Initiatives to provide skill development and ongoing education for DSPs to ensure quality care and job readiness.</li></ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Number of provider agencies and EOR who received funding</li><li>2. Number of individual DSPs who received funds from this award</li><li>3. Specific metrics related to funded program type</li></ol> <p><b>Long-Term:</b> Awardees will provide data related to their turnover rate, their ability to hire new DSPs, and other specifics related to the program type in which they received funds. Program types included: Recruitment and Retention.</p> <p><b>Approach:</b> Awardees will be providing quarterly reporting information for three years through an evaluation process via a Microsoft Forms survey link.</p>

### DSP Advanced Training Program

NCDHHS has partnered with Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, Stanly Community College and Forsyth Technical Community College to pilot an Advanced Training program for DSPs. The program will address a need, a stated desire for DSPs to have deeper specialized training, build expertise in the subject and set DSPs up for career growth and progression. The two-course DSP Advanced Training will fill a needed gap and allow participants to gain a training certificate that they can take with them to be used for applying to future roles, applying to further education or other advancement opportunities.

**Target Launch:** August 2025

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**Table 5.** DSP Advanced Training Program Details



Objectives	Metrics
NCDHHS has contracted with the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) to develop an advanced training course for Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). This continuing education course, titled DSP Advanced Training, will be launched in August 2025 and initially offered at three community colleges, with the possibility to expand NCCCS wide in future semesters.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Number of individuals who successfully complete the advanced training certificate</li> <li>2. Number of individuals who enroll but do not complete the courses.</li> </ol> <p><b>Long-Term:</b> DSPs that complete the DSP Advanced Training Courses will increase their professional mobility.</p> <p><b>Approach:</b> Students will take the course from their perspective community college and information will be reported back to DMHDDSUS via the course evaluation.</p>

### DSP Scholarship Program

NCDHHS plans to partner with an organization to create and administer a scholarship program to provide funds for DSP Advanced Training (previous section). This program aims to remove most of the financial burden associated with education.

**Target Launch:** Fall 2026

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**Table 6.** DSP Scholarship Program Details

Objectives	Metrics
Develop and implement a DSP Scholarship Program with NCCCS to cover the tuition costs related to the NCCCS DSP Advanced Training Certificate.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Number of individuals who apply for the scholarship opportunity</li> <li>2. Number of individuals who accept the scholarship opportunity</li> <li>3. Number of individuals who successfully complete the DSP Advanced Training Certificate program.</li> </ol> <p><b>Long-Term:</b> Year-over-year growth for number of individuals who complete the certificate program, number of program alumni employed, number of individuals who complete program and obtain employment, turnover among program alumni, Provider feedback on program alumni.</p> <p><b>Approach:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploration of options for administration are ongoing.</li> <li>• Survey participants post-program.</li> </ul>

### Core Competency Curriculum

NCDHHS is developing a unified Core Competency Curriculum that reflects what is currently outlined in statute, rule and current educational standards. This course will provide the ability for DSPs to move among providers without the need to recertify, saving time and money for Providers and DSPs.

This program aims to benefit the individuals taking the courses as well as Providers hiring these professionals. The individuals receive no-cost professional training that prepares them for immediate hire by a provider. The Providers will enjoy a decrease in training costs for new employees as well as access to a workforce that is ready to begin working on day one.

The program will inform a phased approach, based on an assessment of the program, that will lead to a state-wide program of Core Competency alignment. Assessment of the program will follow an observation period of one year, beginning after program launch.

**Target Launch:** December 2025

**Table 7.** Core Competency Curriculum Details

Objectives	Metrics
Develop and administer a DSP Core Competency Curriculum that is publicly accessible and free of charge, providing essential, standardized basic training for individuals entering the Direct Support Professional workforce.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Number of individuals who successfully complete curriculum course.</li> <li>2. Number of individuals who enroll but do not complete the curriculum course.</li> <li>3. Scholarship “spend” per student who successfully completes the course.</li> </ol> <p><b>Long-Term:</b> Year-over-year growth for number of individuals who complete the certificate program, number of program alumni employed, number of individuals who complete program and obtain employment, turnover among program alumni, Provider feedback on program alumni.</p> <p><b>Approach:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vendor will collect and report data to NCDHHS on metrics listed above.</li> <li>• Survey participants post-program.</li> </ul>

### DSP Training Bonus Pilot

Pilot program supporting DSPs who successfully complete the Advanced Training Certificate program. This program is in development.

**Target Launch:** May 2026

**Table 8.** DSP Training Bonus Pilot Details

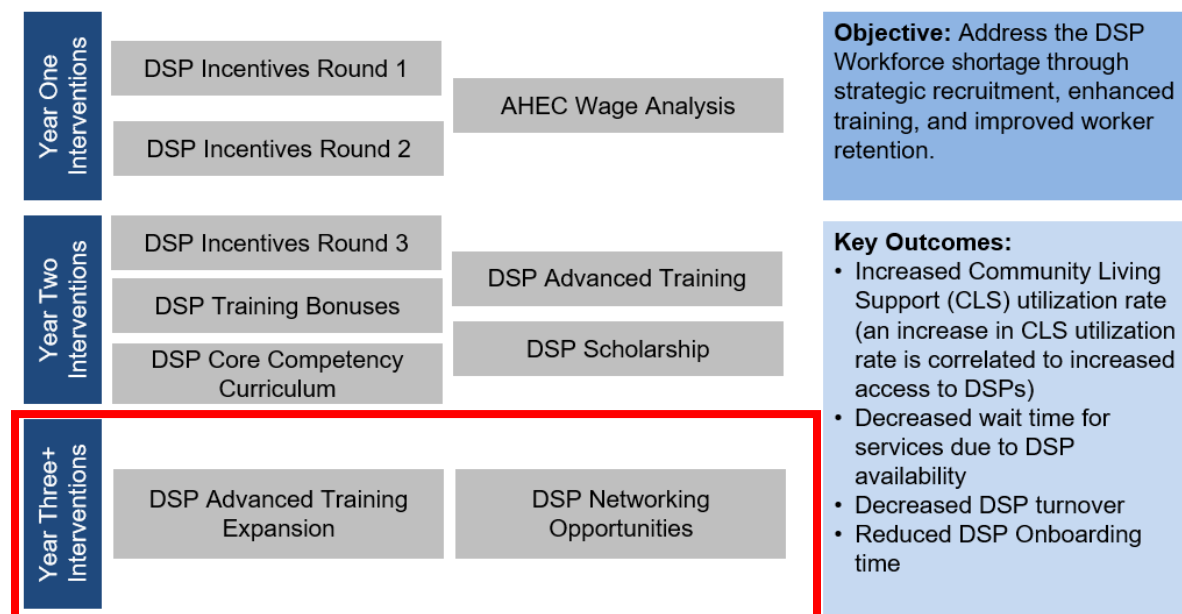
Objectives	Metrics
Develop and administer a DSP Training Bonus for Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) who successfully complete the DSP Advanced Training Certification.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In development</li> </ol> <p><b>Long-Term:</b> In development</p> <p><b>Approach:</b> TBD</p>

### Year-Three and Beyond Programs (July 1, 2026 – Beyond)

NCDHHS continues to research several DSP Workforce programs for implementation in year three and beyond by studying what has been enacted in other states, including a DSP Directory/Platform and expansion of the DSP Advanced Training. NCDHHS will continue to

engage the community throughout this process to ensure proposed programs lead to improved outcomes for DSPs.

Figure 7. Year-Three and Beyond Programs



### DSP Advanced Training Expansion

NCDHHS plans to continue working with the NC Community College System on educational opportunities for DSPs. After the assessment of the DSP Advanced Training program, the Department plans to work with other community colleges to expand the courses across North Carolina.

### DSP Networking Opportunities

The Department is exploring opportunities to support state-wide networking opportunities for DSPs. This system would serve as a resource for tracking DSP certifications, serve as a job board, and provide an opportunity for DSPs to connect with each other and share best practices.