

**North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services:
DMH/DD/SUS Direct Support Professional (DSP) Workforce Plan¹**

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Document Purpose

The State of North Carolina is confronting a critical shortage of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) that is significantly impacting the availability and quality of in home and community-based services for individuals with I/DD. This DSP Workforce Plan captures 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 individuals with I/DD.

The DSP Workforce Plan was developed to guide the use of the Behavioral Health Investment Funds allocated by the General Assembly in the biennium budget² 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").

Samantha R. Case Background

In 2017, a lawsuit was filed by Disability Rights North Carolina ("DRNC"), on behalf of Samantha Rhoney 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.

On Nov. 2, 2022, Superior Court Judge R. Allen Baddour, Jr. entered an injunctive relief order in the Samantha R. case, requiring NCDHHS to meet specified benchmarks that would allow people with I/DD to live in the community with the supports and services they need to succeed and thrive. On Nov. 29, 2022, NCDHHS appealed that order and injunction to the NC Court of Appeals. On the same date, NCDHHS filed a motion asking the Superior Court to temporarily stay (or delay) implementation of the injunction for the duration of the appeal. On February 8, 2023, the Superior Court granted the motion to stay. After the stay was granted, and while the appeal was pending, NCDHHS and DRNC through Court-supervised mediation negotiated an agreement (a "Consent Order") outlining specific actions, outcomes, and reporting requirements. The proposed Consent Order was filed with the Superior Court on April 10, 2024. The Consent Order includes a requirement that NCDHHS provide a draft DSP Workforce Plan to address DSP workforce deficits to DRNC on May 1, 2024, and that NCDHHS launch implementation of its DSP workforce plan no later than July 1, 2024. The Consent Order was approved by the Superior Court on May 16, 2024, and replaces the Court's previous order and injunction issued in November 2022. NCDHHS dismissed its appeal on May 7, 2024.

The DSP Workforce Plan describes NCDHHS's planned actions to comply with the Consent Order requirements related to DSP Workforce. In developing this plan, NCDHHS is also focused on incorporating feedback from various stakeholders, including individuals with disabilities, family members, and community partners.

Funding Dependency

As detailed in this plan, NCDHHS is currently exploring several opportunities for investment that will address the stated shortages of DSP statewide. While NCDHHS is invested in solving the shortage, funding availability is a factor that may prevent wide-scale implementation of planned initiatives. Outside of this workplan, NCDHHS continues to advocate for BH Rate increases. The

² 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 dollars for dedicated investments to addressing 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>.

initiatives listed in this document are pilot programs that, with time and funding, can be scaled and be implemented far beyond their pilot regions.

This is a “living document” and 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 initiatives may change, including potentially adding new initiatives, to help address the causes of the DSP shortage and improve the lives of North Carolinians. NCDHHS plans to reassess the work plan in nine (9) months based on changes to the implementation.

DSP Workforce Shortage

North Carolina is facing a statewide shortage of DSPs that can provide quality home and community-based services to individuals 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.

In 2023, NCDHHS commissioned the NC Area Health Education Centers Program (NC AHEC) to investigate the direct care worker shortage in North Carolina, including issues specifically related to the DSP Workforce. NC AHEC’s final report, the *NC AHEC Recommendations for HCBS Worker Certification*³ (the “NC AHEC Report”) noted several key factors that contribute to the DSP Workforce Shortage, including:

1. **DSPs move between settings, specialties, and populations:** High job turnover rates indicate that DSPs often switch practice settings, or juggle multiple jobs, progressing from one role to another.
2. **Inadequate training programs:** Existing training programs are often inadequate and inconsistent, rather than comprehensive and competency based. Existing competency-based efforts should be enhanced to foster professional advancement.
3. **Work culture change, wage increases, and wrap-around supports:** After recruitment and training efforts for new DSPs, focus must be placed on work culture improvements, wage increases, and wrap-around supports to retain newly trained DSPs.

While NCDHHS has taken several independent steps to address underlying causes of the DSP workforce shortage, including specific efforts to increase direct care worker wages⁴, this DSP Workforce Plan reaffirms NCDHHS’s commitment to Direct Support Professionals and the critical services they provide to individuals 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. As depicted in Figure 1 below, the planned initiatives⁵ 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 individuals with I/DD. This workplan also aligns with the Draft North Carolina Division of Mental

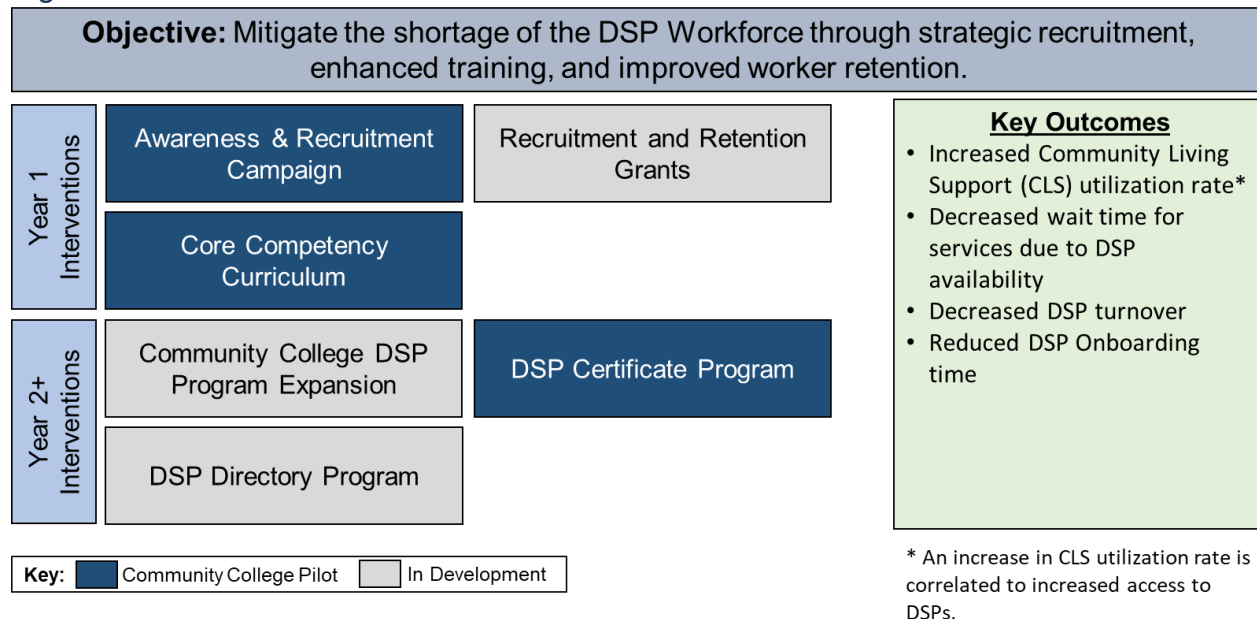
³ NC AHEC Recommendations for HCBS Worker Certification. <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/nc-ahec-recommendations-dcw-hcbs-worker-certification/download?attachment>.

⁴ Direct Care Worker Wage Increase Initiatives. <https://medicaid.ncdhhs.gov/DCW-InitiativePreviousDCWWageIncreaseInitiatives-3037>.

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

Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services Strategic Plan for 2024–2029⁶, Goal 4.2: Goal 4.2: Strengthen DSP Workforce: Build a well-trained and supported DSP workforce. Additional detail on the each of the planned initiatives is included in the following pages.

Figure 1. DSP Workforce Plan – Framework



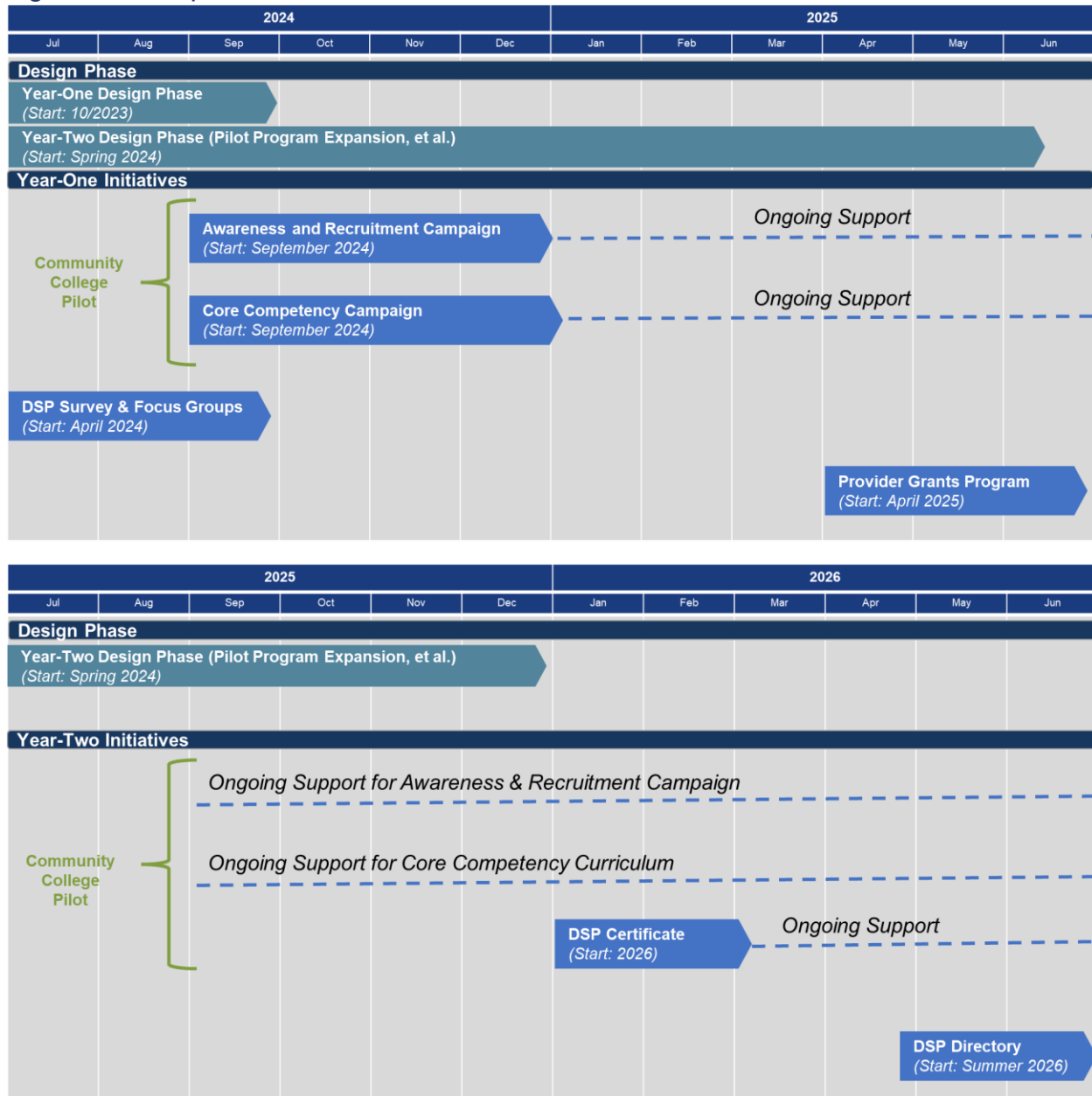
* An increase in CLS utilization rate is correlated to increased access to DSPs.

Anticipated Timeline

At the time of this Plan’s publication, NCDHHS is still in the Design Phase of the initiatives, with the launch of the first initiative (Awareness and Recruitment Campaign) planned for September 2024. NCDHHS will track Key Performance Indicators/Metrics for each initiative, refine goals and objectives using these measures, and revise the initiatives 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 2 below illustrates the anticipated timeline of the DSP Workforce Plan including the initiative design and projected implementation for Year-One and future Initiatives.

⁶ Draft 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-dmhdssus-strategic-plan-june-2024/open>

Figure 2. Anticipated Timelines



DSP Workforce Plan

Design Phase

A NCDHHS cross-divisional DSP Workgroup was established to develop initiatives which will 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 to design this Workplan.

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 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)⁷ that outlines 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.

In addition to the NC AHEC Report and the Caregiving Workforce Report, the DSP Workgroup focused design planning on a PHI framework of critical factors that impact job quality for DSPs. The PHI framework organizes direct care job quality into five pillars:⁸ Quality Training, Fair Compensation, Supervision and Support, Respect and Recognition, and Real Opportunities.

Community Engagement

A key component of the Design Phase is Community Engagement, which collectively refers to cross-functional workgroups that have met to support planning and execution of the DSP Workforce Plan. The workgroups include representation from a variety of stakeholders including DSPs, 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

⁷ 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>

⁸ PHI 5 Pillars of Direct Care Job Quality: <https://www.phinational.org/resource/the-5-pillars-of-direct-care-job-quality/#:~:text=A%20high%2Dquality%20direct%20care,and%20recognition%2C%20and%20real%20opportunity.>

is being used to help develop the initiatives outlined in this Workplan. Brief descriptions of each workgroup are included below:

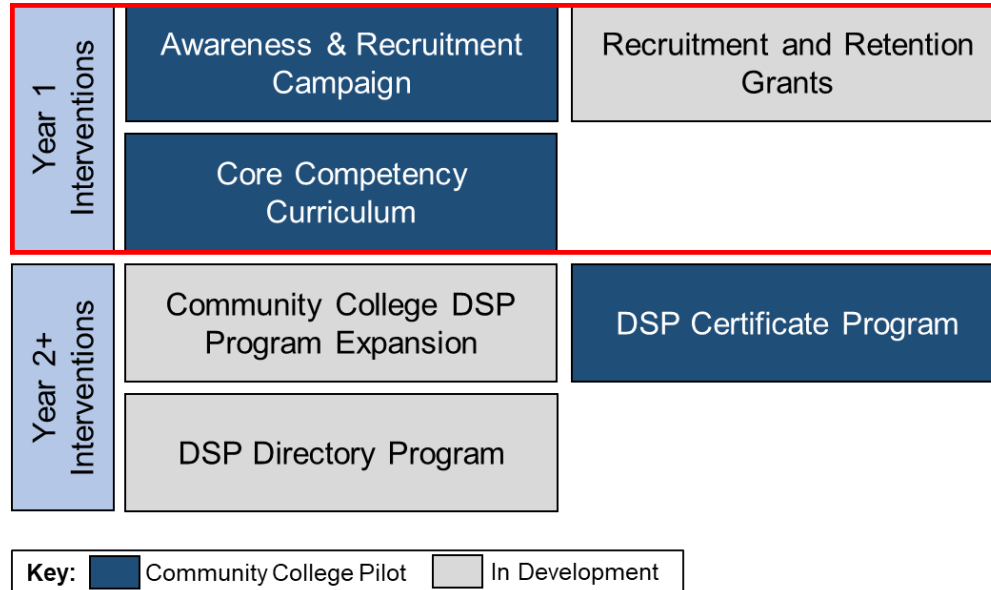
- **DMH/DD/SUS DSP Advisory Committee** (launched October 2023) – Monthly meeting of community stakeholders that includes DSPs, Providers, Families, and others to provide input on initiatives and steer potential investment initiatives.
- **DMH/DD/SUS Side-by-Side Webinar** (launch October 2023) – monthly DMH/DD/SUS webinar with community members on key initiatives.
- **Inclusion Connects Advisory Committee (ICAC)** (target launch June 2024) – workgroup responsible for researching, recommending, and providing support/guidance for future implementation of best practices to meet the needs of individuals with intellectual/developmental Disabilities.
- **DSP Focus Groups** (target launch July 2024) – groups of DSPs gathered on a regular cadence to provide further insights into potential opportunities for support, meant to address gaps that the state can address with investments. Surveys will be used to feed relevant information to Focus Group discussions.
- **Curriculum Development Group** (target launch August 2024) – group of DSPs that are consulted on curriculum development in the Community College Pilot Program.

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

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

NCDHHS has identified three initiatives for implementation in Year-One of the DSP Workforce Plan. Three of the initiatives, the blue boxes in the figure below, are focused on strategic recruitment and enhanced training through community college partnerships.

Figure 3. Year-One Initiatives



Community College Pilot Program

NCDHHS plans to partner with at least one Community College to create a Pilot Program which will help strengthen the DSP Workforce through three key focus areas: Launching an Awareness and Recruitment Campaign, creating a Core Competency Curriculum, and creating a DSP Certificate Program. The first Pilot Program will be with a Community College partner that has made progress in designing their own program, with the same goals as DMH/DD/SUS. The Pilot Program will have a scholarship component, where participants' tuition and fees are reimbursed. If this Pilot is effective, there are plans to expand this effort statewide with other community college partners (see Year-Two and Beyond).

Awareness and Recruitment Campaign

The Awareness and Recruitment Campaign, which targets high school students, community college students, the unemployed, and underemployed persons, is designed to introduce individuals to careers in human services. The community college system has pre-existing relationships that can be leveraged to create a pipeline of individuals into the DSP field. This is meant to educate individuals on the pathway to becoming a DSP and the benefits of choosing this as a viable career.

This campaign will target prospective people interested in becoming a DSP as well as Providers. The community college will leverage their already existing networks to inform high school students, etc. about the possibility of DSP as a career path. Additionally, NCDHHS will engage

with Providers through the already existing Community Engagement apparatus to inform them of the existence, and benefits, of this program.

Target Launch: September 2024 (depending on community college partner’s capabilities)

Objectives	Metrics
<p>Increase awareness of the DSP career by:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Incorporating the DSP role into the community college’s broader career services infrastructure. 2. Creating an outreach campaign which will utilize billboards, mailings, social media, staff embedded in high schools, career fairs, and a multitude of other avenues. 3. Creating a recruitment approach for High School students. <p>NCDHHS will support by:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Helping to develop outreach language and messaging. 2. Amplifying reach via web pages and social media. 	<p>Number of program participants recruited through the DSP Awareness and Recruitment campaign and matched with employers.</p> <p>Approach: Community College partner will collect and report data to the NCDHHS.</p>

Core Competency Curriculum

NCDHHS plans to partner with a Community College in their development of a Core Competency Curriculum. The unified Core Curriculum will reflect what is currently outlined in statute and current educational standards. This course will provide the ability for DSPs to move amongst 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 makes them immediately hireable 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 immediately.

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 begin in early 2025 and assess the impact against the stated goals of the program.

Target Launch: September 2024 (depending on community college capabilities and curriculum readiness)

Objectives	Metrics
<p>Develop and administer a DSP core competency curriculum.</p> <p>NCDHHS will support the Community College by</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Exploring financial supports including: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. For individuals who complete the Core Competency Curriculum. b. For the Community College partner to offset any administrative burden that the program might create. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of individuals who successfully complete curriculum course. 2. Number of individuals who enroll but do not complete the curriculum course. 3. Number of individuals who complete both the core competency curriculum and the DSP certificate program. 4. Scholarship “spend” per student who successfully completes the course.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Convening a curriculum committee that includes DSPs to monitor and provide input into the curriculum to ensure it reflects “on-the-ground” experience and legally required components. 3. Setting parameters and standards for the core competency program. 	<p>Long-Term: Year-on-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>Approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Colleges/LME-MCOs will collect and report data to NCDHHS on metrics listed above. • Survey participants post-program.
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Provider Recruitment and Retention Grants

NCDHHS is proposing implementing a grant funding mechanism for provider agencies. This is a rethinking of the previous Supplemental Benefits and Longevity Bonuses that had been previously proposed. Grants would be available as a one-time funding opportunity. Providers would be encouraged to build upon existing programs and infrastructure to support their Direct Support Workforce.

NCDHHS is in the process of determining the criteria for eligibility and award amounts.⁹ Additionally, NCDHHS is currently researching how similar programs function in other states to finalize the design of the program here in North Carolina.

Target Launch: April 2025

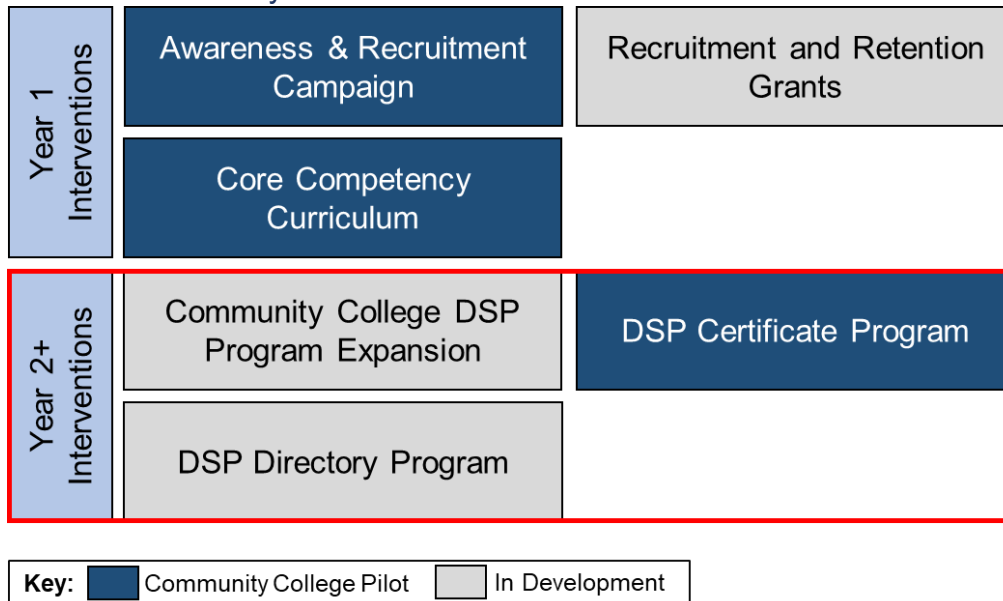
Objectives	Metrics
<p>NCDHHS will research best use of grant funds to support recruitment and retention such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring and retention bonuses • Child/dependent/senior care support; or • Transportation support (e.g., public transit, care maintenance, ride share reimbursement, etc.) 	<p>Long-Term: TBD</p> <p>Approach: TBD</p>

⁹ These awards/grants are separate from the Behavioral Health Rate Increases enacted by the state legislature.

Year-Two and Beyond Initiatives (July 1, 2025 – Beyond)

NCDHHS continues to research several DSP Workforce initiatives for implementation in year two and beyond by studying what has been enacted in other states, including a Community College DSP Program Expansion, DSP Certificate Program, and establishing a DSP Directory (See Figure 4.). NCDHHS will continue to engage the community throughout the design process to ensure proposed initiatives lead to improved outcomes.

Figure 4. Year-Two and Beyond Initiatives



DSP Directory Program

NCDHHS is currently investigating a DSP Directory that could serve as an interactive platform for anyone seeking and providing DSP services. Through the directory, DSPs and providers could connect on job opportunities and NCDHHS could disseminate updates relevant to the populations served. DSPs could connect with individuals and families seeking their services, and NCDHHS could track certifications.

NCDHHS is exploring the deployment of the DSP Directory, but several factors including vendor capabilities, technical requirements and available funding are constant factors. This initiative will employ a phased approach with the earliest launch estimated to be Summer 2026.

Target Launch: Summer 2026

Objectives	Metrics
<p>NCDHHS will research creating an interactive Directory for anyone that is seeking a DSP's services. The Directory could provide the following features:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allow DSPs to connect with individuals and families seeking their services 2. Track Certifications 	<p>NCDHHS will measure the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of users that visit the site monthly. 2. Number of DSPs that create and manage profiles. 3. Number of DSPs that find roles using the directory. 4. Number of people who find a DSP through the directory.

<p>3. Connecting with other DSPs to post their availability when seeking (or not seeking) new clients</p> <p>4. Specialization endorsement tracking</p> <p>NCDHHS will aid individuals that need it to navigate to and use the site</p>	<p>Long-Term: TBD</p> <p>Approach: TBD</p>
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Community College DSP Program Expansion

NCDHHS plans to assess the pilot program for a period of two years, beginning after the launch of the program (assessment period of September 2024 to September 2026). As the program is assessed NCDHHS will adjust, as necessary, to stay aligned to the intended goals of the project.

Assessment of the Core Competency Curriculum program will launch in February 2025 (providing at least five months of data), while the assessment of the DSP certificate program will begin in November of 2025 (providing at least three months of data). NCDHHS will measure the impact of the program against the stated purpose and determine the appropriate method of expansion in collaboration with community college partners as well as other stakeholders. When an appropriate course of action is determined, NCDHHS will work collaboratively with the various stakeholders to roll out the expansion, if the assessment deems it necessary.

NCDHHS plans to explore the possibility of including a practicum or hands-on element of the pilot program. The structure of this portion of the expansion will depend on partner capabilities as well as the ability to identify viable practicum sites. Other considerations for this planned expansion are funding and provider agency capabilities.

It should be noted that the expansion of the program will be dependent on the availability of funding and willingness of collaboration partners.

DSP Certificate Program

NCDHHS is partnering with a Community College to create a DSP Certificate program that would include a Practicum component, intended to provide real world on-the-job experience to certify students. The program will provide graduates with advanced training and credits which may be applied towards an associate degree.

As with the core competency curriculum NCDHHS will provide scholarship funding to ensure the program is no-cost to DSPs. Upon completion of the DSP Certificate, NCDHHS is exploring the possibility of individuals receiving an hourly wage differential (amounts still being determined) through the LME-MCO partner. This component is meant to incentivize participation on the part of the participants. Not only will they be receiving an increase in pay, but they will also be receiving college credit that can be used towards a degree, should they have those aspirations.

This certificate program aims to benefit the individuals taking the courses as well as Providers hiring these professionals. The individuals receive college credits that they can use towards a post-secondary degree program, no cost professional training and an increase in pay once completing the course. As with the Core Competency Curriculum, the Providers will enjoy a decrease in training costs for new employees and access to an expanding workforce to address their needs.

Target Launch: 2026 (depending on community college capabilities)

Objectives	Metrics
<p>Create a DSP Certificate program that meets the following recommendations:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The coursework can be delivered online, in-person, or in a hybrid format. 2. Coursework that allows for specialization in specific disabilities and disability-related topics. 3. Credits earned in certificate program can be used towards an associate degree. 4. Coursework will include ethics. <p>NCDHHS will explore financial incentives including:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Scholarships for all certification program enrollees and financial support to cover or subsidize lost wages during coursework. 2. Supporting wage differentials tied to obtaining the certificate. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of individuals who successfully complete the certificate program. 2. Number of individuals who enroll but do not complete the certificate program. 3. Number of individuals who complete both the core competency curriculum and the DSP certificate program. 4. Scholarship “spend” per student who successfully completes the course. <p>Long-Term: Year-on-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>Approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community College/LME-MCOs will collect and report data to NCDHHS on metrics listed above. • Survey participants post-program.