



*Evaluation Brief*  
**THE NYSACRA  
EXPERIENCE USING  
THE COLLEGE OF  
DIRECT SUPPORT**

## BACKGROUND

The New York State Association of Community and Residential Agencies (NYSACRA) is a membership organization comprised of nearly 200 not-for-profit corporations supporting individuals with developmental disabilities living in communities across New York State. Diverse in geographic location, size, origins, and history, these agencies share a unifying goal: providing quality supports for the people they serve.

Toward that end, over 30 years ago they created NYSACRA to serve as a source of information, their voice, and a catalyst for change on a statewide basis. Among other things, NYSACRA promotes best practices—through statewide and regional conferences, leadership forums, newsletters and electronic bulletins—and helps shape New York State policies concerning individuals with developmental disabilities—through legislative, administrative, and fiscal advocacy.

Central to NYSACRA member agencies' mission of providing quality supports are the men and women who each day directly support the individuals being served. As such, for the past decade NYSACRA has spent considerable energy to promote the presence of a stable, competent, and professional direct support workforce. From lobbying for enhanced salaries and benefits, to offering increased training opportunities, and, to most recently, incubating a New York State Chapter of the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (the Direct Support Professional Alliance of New York State), NYSACRA has endeavored to elevate the compensation, skills, and stature of direct support workers.

## NYSACRA AND THE COLLEGE OF DIRECT SUPPORT

In recent years, the College of Direct Support has been an integral part of NYSACRA's efforts in this regard. NYSACRA's research indicated that the College of Direct Support offered a curriculum, reviewed and edited by a national panel of experts in the field, which blended the Community Support Skills Standards and the National Code of Ethics for Direct Support Professionals into the learning; offered consistency for all learners; and, being on-line, provided flexible access at any time by learners whose schedules, as direct support professionals, are busy.

Beginning in 2006, with the financial assistance of a grant from the New York State Departments of Labor and Health, NYSACRA began offering the College of Direct Support as one component of a Disabilities Study Certificate program.

The Disabilities Study Certificate program offers direct support professionals of member agencies the opportunity to pursue a course of study, free of charge, which delves into disability-related issues on both a theoretical and practical level—an opportunity that can lead to further college-level work. In addition to college preparatory work, learners in the program take 12 credit-hours of courses germane to the field at a local community college and are then enrolled in the College of Direct Support, receiving a Disabilities Study Certificate upon their completion of all three components.

For direct support professionals of member agencies not interested in courses in a traditional college setting, beginning in 2008, NYSACRA began offering open enrollment in the College of Direct Support as a stand-alone program.

By the summer of 2009, approximately 1,700 staff of 77 member agencies had participated in the College of Direct Support (CDS) through either of these two programs and nearly 1,200 had completed the CDS curriculum, a 71% completion rate. Currently there are 406 new learners enrolled and taking courses in the College of Direct Support, including staff from seven NYSACRA member agencies that have not participated in the program before. To date, nearly half of NYSACRA's membership has availed itself of the College of Direct Support through NYSACRA's sponsorship.

## WHAT LEARNERS SAY ABOUT THE COLLEGE OF DIRECT SUPPORT

Starting in 2008, NYSACRA asked learners who had participated in the College of Direct Support to share their impressions of the program, voluntarily and anonymously, by completing a survey developed by the University of Minnesota's Research and Training Center. Responses were received from 522 learners, or 40% of the nearly 1,300 individuals who had participated in the College of Direct Support during four NYSACRA sponsored sessions in 2008 and 2009. Of these, 141 had taken part in the CDS' College of Frontline Supervision curriculum.

Nearly three-fourths of the respondents were direct support professionals (51%) or frontline supervisors (22%), i.e., staff who may provide some direct care (up to 50% of their time) but whose primary job is to supervise direct support professionals. Other types of supervisors, managers, and/or human resource professionals constituted the next larger group completing the survey (20%). The remaining respondents were behavior specialists, vocational counselors, service coordinators, etc.

Most worked in an agency owned/leased residential program (64%) or day/vocational program (19%). Some, approximately 5%, however, worked in the home, or the family home, of the individual they supported or at a community site where the individual worked competitively or in a supported employment capacity. The remainder worked in a variety of other settings such as training departments, administrative offices, etc. Many provider agencies offer a blended on-line training through the College of Direct Support and class room discussion. It allows learners the opportunity for deeper discussion and critical thinking on the topics covered in the on-line lessons – the best of both training worlds.

The vast majority of learners, over 85% in most sessions, indicated that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement, “I would recommend CDS training to someone who works in the same position that I do.” Likewise, approximately two-thirds to three-fourths of the learners indicated that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement, “As a result of using the CDS my skills have greatly improved.” (*See Tables 1 and 2.*)

Learners were also asked to indicate what situations they felt more qualified to handle after having participated in the College of Direct Support and its companion curriculum, the College of Frontline Supervision. (*See Tables 3 and 4.*)

The top three situations most learners felt more qualified to deal with as a result of the College of Direct Support were:

- ❖ Supporting people to make their own choices and decisions.

- ❖ Identifying what is most important to people and helping people achieve their personal goals.
- ❖ Helping people learn new things that matter to them.

For learners participating in the College of Frontline Supervision, the top three items most felt more qualified to handle were:

- ❖ Recognizing staff contributions and letting staff contribute in meaningful ways.
- ❖ Enhancing staff performance and motivation.
- ❖ Providing effective and fair feedback to staff regarding performance.

Time and time again, learners completing the survey praised the CDS' flexibility and its capacity to allow them to study and learn at their own pace. One learner summed it up by saying, "It allowed me the time to further my knowledge while working full time."

## WHAT AGENCY ADMINISTRATORS SAY ABOUT THE COLLEGE OF DIRECT SUPPORT

In serving as a master administrator of the College of Direct Support for its member agencies, NYSACRA has had the opportunity to receive anecdotal feedback from agency administrators whose staff have participated in the program.

Administrators have reported that staff completing the CDS:

- ❖ have a more person-centered approach to providing services;
- ❖ challenge others to take a more person-centered approach in their planning;
- ❖ tend to be the ones bringing new ideas to the table;
- ❖ seem to be more aware of what “inclusion really is” and have an increased awareness of healthy lifestyles, safety, and individual rights;
- ❖ feel as if they have been challenged by the course work and learned a lot;
- ❖ view themselves as professionals;
- ❖ take more pride in the work they do;
- ❖ feel more empowered to make decisions; and
- ❖ appear to have a greater interest in learning about and participating in the agencies’ special, innovative, or pilot projects.

One administrator, who herself is a long-term employee (with over 30 years experience with the agency) indicated that she was surprised by the response of long-term staff who had participated in the CDS. There was, she reported, a “motivational change” in their typical attitudes, an “opened mind to look at something anew...and try something new.”

Her comments, and those of others, mirror what one learner wrote in a survey: “The CDS provides workers an opportunity to be reminded of why we work in the field. It provides new workers more information when starting out and provides older workers with information we did not know and were never told about.”

Administrators of agencies with high CDS completion rates indicated that they recognize and support staff participation in the CDS in different ways.

One agency offers learners the opportunity to purchase lap tops (at the agency’s cost) with a re-payment schedule of the employee’s choosing (six months, one year, or one-and-a-half years.) This same agency offers hourly salary increases for each module of the CDS completed.

Another agency treats completion of the CDS as one step of an internal certification program, which also includes taking three outside courses, subscribing to the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals' Code of Ethics, and the completion of a special project of the staff's choosing. The agency views the certification as the equivalent of attaining a college-level Associate's degree. Staff who attain the internal certification receive pay commensurate with an Associate's degree.

A third agency offers promotional opportunities for learners who complete the CDS.

These administrators believe that success in the College of Direct Support also requires strong administrative support in non-financial ways, including: leading by example and participating in the CDS themselves; creating project groups who can assist learners and plan activities associated with course work which facilitate the implementation of what was learned; providing staff with computer support and assistance, as many staff do not have computer access or are not that computer savvy; and celebrating success by hosting "graduation" parties or sending out special notes and announcements about staff who have completed the course of study.

## WHAT NYSACRA HAS LEARNED

NYSACRA has learned several things by serving as an administrator of the College of Direct Support for its member agencies.

First, as was suggested by NYSACRA's earlier research, the College of Direct Support has proven to be a valuable tool in its efforts to sustain and promote the presence of a competent, professional direct support workforce. In the course of less than four years, approximately 1,700 staff of NYSACRA member agencies have participated in the program with 71% of enrolled learners completing it.

Learners, who completed surveys, indicated that the program enhanced their skills in a variety of areas critical to providing quality, person-centered supports to individuals with developmental disabilities. A significant majority indicated that they would recommend the College of Direct Support to their peers. Also, agency administrators anecdotally attested to the enhanced competencies, attitudes, and professionalism of learners who had completed the program. Many learners completing the program saw increased salaries and promotional opportunities as a result; but NYSACRA has no concrete data on how many or how this may have assisted with staff retention issues.

NYSACRA's experience also suggests that agency leadership is critical to actualizing the value that the College of Direct Support offers. With approximately 71% of staff from member agencies completing the course of study, NYSACRA has begun to explore the variance in completion rates among agencies. Thirty five agencies, enrolling as few as three learners to as many as 119 learners per session, had overall completion rates of 80% to 100%. Nearly half of these agencies had 100% completion rates. On the other hand, 24 agencies, enrolling as few as three learners to as many as 37 learners per session, had overall completion rates of 0% to 59%. Six agencies that enrolled a total of 65 learners had 0% completion rates. Agency size (large or small), geographic location (urban, suburban, or rural), or the number of learners enrolled in a session (few or many) did not seem to play a role in the agencies' completion rates.

Considering the uniformity, consistency, flexibility, and on-line availability of the CDS curriculum - as well as the fact that all direct support professionals in New York must be high school graduates or have a GED and many face similar problems with computer access and experience - NYSACRA believes that one factor contributing to the widely divergent completion rates is the degree of administrative support learners receive from their agencies. This may be a reflection of the value agency leadership places on the professionalization of its direct support workforce, or it may simply reflect inattention on the part of agency managers to the support needs of staff enrolled in the College of Direct Support. Either way, it warrants attention if agencies are to reap the benefits of the College of Direct Support. NYSACRA intends on disseminating information to all its members on the practices employed by its high completion rate agencies in supporting their learners in the College of Direct Support. The College of

Direct Support may want to consider doing the same for all agencies participating in the program given its unique, national perspective.

Finally, having heard the value of the College of Direct Support expressed by hundreds of learners and administrators, NYSACRA believes that there is a need to develop greater means of access to the program. In addition to providing excellent training on critical issues, the College of Direct Support is the only course of study available to put staff in New York State on the path of being credentialed as a professional by the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals. Access to the training, however, is controlled by a gatekeeper/administrator system. NYSACRA serves as the CDS administrator for staff of its member agencies, but NYSACRA represents only half the agencies in New York State serving individuals with developmental disabilities. As a result, thousands of direct support staff working in provider agencies in New York that do not offer training via the College of Direct Support, or affiliated with NYSACRA, have limited means of access to the program or a chance of receiving the national credential. The College of Direct Support should consider ways of maximizing access to its program for those direct support professionals who are interested in pursuing enhanced training and/or a national credential, but and have no means of support by their employer or trade association to access the College of Direct Support.

### Table 1

**Percentage of respondents indicating the degree to which they agree with the statement:**

*I would recommend CDS training to someone who works in the same position that I do.*

Session	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
#1 2008	0%	5.7%	17.1%	40%	37.1%
#2 2008	4.2%	3.3%	6.7%	47.5%	38.3%
#1 2009	0.6%	1.7%	7.3%	48.9%	41.6%
#2 2009	0%	3.6%	8.9%	42.9%	44.6%

### Table 2

**Percentage of respondents indicating the degree to which they agree with the statement:**

*As a result of using the CDS my skills have greatly improved.*

Session	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
#1 2008	0%	0%	37.1%	42.9%	20%
#2 2008	1.7%	5%	31.1%	41.2%	21%
#1 2009	1.1%	0.6%	22.6%	49.2%	26.6%
#2 2009	0%	3.5%	21.1%	47.4%	28.1%

### Table 3

**Percentages of respondents who feel more qualified to handle the following situations after using the College of Direct Support (N= 522)**

Situation	Feel More Qualified
Supporting people to make their own choices and decisions	78.4%
Understanding the importance of a person's history in shaping who they are today	66.9%
Helping to keep people I support safe in their homes and community	66.7%
Making ethical decisions as a direct support professional	68.2%
Redirecting people who have challenging behavior to prevent outbursts	64.6%
Monitoring the health of the people I support and ensuring appropriate interventions	62.8%
Supporting people to make friends	66.1%
Connecting people to others in their community and supporting them to have valued roles and many relationships	70.3%
Helping people remain connected to family members and friends of their choosing	62.6%
Teaching people to advocate for their own needs and wants and when needed advocating on their behalf	69.3%
Ensuring people I support understand their rights and protecting these rights	69.2%
Protecting people I support from harm by ensuring that they are not abused, neglected or exploited	66.7%
Helping people learn new things that matter to them	71.6%
Helping people use medications effectively	47.7%
Identifying what is most important to people and helping people to achieve their personal goals	73.0%
Understanding cultural differences and providing culturally competent supports	60.2%

**Table 4**

**Percentages of respondents who feel more qualified to handle the following situations after using the College of Frontline Supervision (N= 141)**

Situation	Feel More Qualified
Understanding how to develop a plan for reducing turnover and vacancy	61.0%
Understanding how to assess problems and challenges related turnover and vacancy	70.0%
Developing and using competency-based training	62.4%
Using multiple and effective strategies for marketing	53.2%
Developing and using Realistic Job Previews	62.4%
Enhancing staff performance and motivation	80.9%
Using a variety of selection techniques to find qualified staff	64.5%
Providing effective and fair feedback to staff regarding performance	74.5%
Recognizing staff contributions and letting staff contribute in meaningful ways	82.3

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