

Opinion

Commentary: Better federal data would strengthen services for people with disabilities

Direct-support professionals' work is essential to disability services, but current job classifications make the workforce difficult to track and support

By **Karen Russell**, For the Times Union

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Twenty-nine people on our staff at New Hope Community, a nonprofit supporting people with disabilities, have dedicated more than 20 years to our organization – a combined 755 years of service. Most of them began their careers as direct-support professionals, assisting people with disabilities as they build daily living skills, pursue personal goals and live more independently.

But federal labor statistics do not properly recognize these professionals. They are grouped with professions such as home health aides and personal care aides in the federal Standard Occupational Classification system, even though their responsibilities can extend well beyond those roles.

On Aug. 6, the U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee unanimously advanced the Recognizing the Role of Direct Support Professionals Act. This legislation would require the Office of Management and Budget to consider establishing a separate occupational code for direct-support professionals. The bill now sits on the Senate calendar, waiting for floor time. Likewise, the House companion legislation was referred to the House Education and Workforce Committee, where it has stalled.

We have been here before. The Senate passed nearly identical legislation unanimously in the previous Congress. It died without a House vote.

Without reliable workforce data, policymakers cannot accurately determine how many of these professionals are working across the country, what they earn, where shortages

are most severe or how quickly they are leaving the field. And if they cannot accurately measure the workforce, it becomes much harder to develop effective policies that support providers in recruiting and retaining talent.

That challenge is particularly significant for organizations like ours: Our services are funded through Medicaid and do not offer the same flexibility as other industries to offset labor costs.

Competitive compensation for direct-support professionals is, therefore, about sustaining the workforce.

We are not alone. Our trade association's sixth annual survey of community-based disability service providers found that 88% of community-based disability providers experienced moderate or severe staffing shortages during the previous year and 62% turned away new referrals because they lacked adequate staffing.

When direct-support positions cannot compete with jobs in other industries, providers recruit, onboard and train replacements continually. Turnover consumes resources that could otherwise be invested in programs and people. People with disabilities lose consistency in service.

Creating a distinct occupational classification will not resolve those challenges on its own, but better data can give policymakers and providers a clearer understanding of workforce challenges and provide a stronger foundation the future of disability services. More than 1,500 public comments submitted to that review have already raised the issue. But the bill requires OMB to report to Congress if it declines to create the code. This is the difference between a possibility and an obligation.

The strength of our service system ultimately depends on the strength of the people providing those services. Congress can start by acknowledging that they exist.

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