



Frequently Asked Questions

Why Direct Support Professionals Need a Unique Standard Occupational Classification

What is the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system?

The Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system is a standardized system used by federal agencies to classify workers into occupational categories. The purpose of the system is to collect, calculate, and disseminate employment data. All federal agencies that publish occupational data for statistical purposes, such as the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), are required to use the SOC to increase data comparability across Federal programs. The SOC system is overseen by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

What kind of data is collected for each SOC?

For each SOC, the BLS collects the following data:

- National employment estimates for employment and wage
- National percentile wage estimates
- Employment by industry
- Employment by state and area
- Location quotient by state and area
- Annual mean wage by state and area

What are DSPs?

Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) provide home and community-based services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) that promote independence and community inclusion. Direct support may include coaching and career development, pursuing personal goals, and aiding activities of daily living, such as meal preparation, medication management, and supporting communication.

Are DSPs already included in a SOC?

DSPs perform complex duties that are not adequately captured by existing standard occupational classifications. In 2019, a new SOC was created by merging the 2018 SOC occupations 31-1121 Home Health Aides and 31-1122 Personal Care Aides and the 2010 SOC occupations 31-1011 Home Health Aides and 39-9021 Personal Care Aides. However, this merged classification does not encompass the variety of work performed by DSPs.

While the BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook indicates that some personal care aides may choose to work with people who have developmental or intellectual disabilities, the description leaves out much of the work performed by trained DSPs including supporting community integration and person-centered supports.¹

A description that more accurately captures the work of DSPs was proposed to BLS in 2018. That proposed classification for DSPs, which was supported by a bipartisan group of 30 members of

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, *Home Health and Personal Care Aides*, <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/home-health-aides-and-personal-care-aides.htm> (visited May 31, 2022).

Congress,² included “enhanc[ing] independence and community inclusion” for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and involved “coaching and supporting individuals with IDD to communicate their needs, achieve self-expression, pursue personal goals, and participate actively in employment or voluntary roles in the community” and well as additional support in providing “assistance with activities of daily living (e.g. feeding, bathing, toileting, or ambulation) and with tasks such as meal preparation, shopping, light housekeeping, and laundry. . . [and] provid[ing] support to a person with a disability at home, work, school, church, and other community places.”

Why do DSPs need a new distinct SOC?

There is currently no mechanism to comprehensively collect employment and wage data specifically for DSPs. The annual Staff Stability Survey conducted by National Core Indicators® Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (NCI) captures employment and wage data for DSPs from certain participating states, but it does not capture every state. For example, in 2020, the Staff Stability Survey only included volunteered information from 26 states plus the District of Columbia.

According to the most recent NCI report, the national turnover rate among DSPs is approximately 44%, but ranges as high as 79.5% in some states.³ In addition, vacancy rates for DSPs increased from 8.5% in 2019 to 12.3% in 2020—a roughly 45% increase. The loss of DSPs across the field has left many individuals without stable access to home and community-based supports. In fact, a 2021 survey of community providers across the country indicated that the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and continued exodus of DSPs from the field have forced providers to stop accepting new referrals, delay the implementation of new programs and, in too many instances, shutter existing services altogether.⁴

Without comprehensive data, the totality of the workforce crisis cannot be properly assessed. By designating the DSP as its own SOC, the BLS will be able to more accurately capture data specific to the profession, which will in turn assist federal and state policymakers to inform and impact future policy.

How does the SOC affect rate setting and DSP wages?

The current classification system is affecting state and federal agencies’ policy decisions, such as rate-setting, which has negative longstanding effects on the retention and recruitment for the DSP workforce. This is deeply concerning as providers that employ these workers grapple with a workforce crisis that has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The turnover and vacancy rates jeopardize individuals’ access to home and community-based services. Without a sufficient workforce, providers are forced to close programs, putting individuals with I/DD at higher risk of hospitalization and institutionalization.⁵

² Letter from Congress to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistic Acting Commissioner William Waitrowski (Oct. 26, 2018).

³ National Core Indicators Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities *2020 Staff Stability Survey*, available at https://www.nationalcoreindicators.org/upload/core-indicators/2020StaffStabilitySurveyReport_FINAL.pdf.

⁴ American Network of Community Options & Resources, *The State of America’s Direct Support Workforce 2021*, available at https://www.ancor.org/sites/default/files/the_state_of_americas_direct_support_workforce_crisis_2021.pdf.

⁵ *Id.*

For example, Georgia uses an assumed wage of \$10.63 per hour for its DSPs. This was determined with 2014 BLS data using a blend of 60% Personal Care Aide, 10% Home Health Aide, 10% Recreation Worker, 10% Social/Human Services Assistant, and 10% Rehabilitation Counselor. The resulting wage was then inflated to July 2016 and remains unchanged since its original implementation.

What is the process for creating a SOC?

OMB is responsible for the creation and revision of the SOC system. The SOC Policy Committee, which is chaired by BLS, is the committee that assists OMB in conducting the SOC revision process and results in recommendations for changes to occupational codes. Revising the code is a years-long endeavor. The most recent revision was finalized in 2018, but began in 2012. The next revision is scheduled for 2028.

Is there cost associated with creating a new SOC for DSPs?

The creation of a new SOC will not create any additional costs; rather, it will allow states and employers to understand workforce trends in the disability service sector more accurately, which will influence policymaking and job creation. A new SOC has the potential to expand access to home and community-based services for people with I/DD and elevate the DSP profession for a workforce that is predominantly comprised of women and people of color.

How can legislation help?

Members of Congress have introduced a bill, *Recognizing the Role of Direct Support Professionals Act*, which would require OMB to revise the SOC system to create a new code for DSPs. In particular, it would designate a separate code (31–1123) for direct support professionals, to be listed under the current healthcare support occupation classification that includes home health aides and personal care aides.