



Building Resources for Individuals with Disabilities to Gain Equality

## **JASON UMSTOT'S SPEECH**

**September 27, 2018**

We are all here for a reason regarding the work that we do. For me, my path started a little over 20 years ago, when I was in college. I was searching for a job with meaning and purpose, one that would fulfill my dreams of working with people and offered the intangible reward of watching others succeed. While looking through the newspaper, a small 2x2 ad caught my eye. It read, "Seeking applicants to work with people with DD." That simple ad made such a big difference in my life.

Growing up in a poor, rural town in West Virginia taught me some valuable lessons that would prepare me for the years to come. One of the most important was prioritizing my interests and creating goals to get where I wanted to be. I always knew that I wanted to work with people. At the time, I wasn't sure exactly what area, but I knew the track I wanted to go down. So, this small little ad caught my attention and honestly, it never mattered to me what DD stood for.

That decision changed my life and I'm sure many of you who are here today would attest to having a similar experience. Professionally, being a direct support professional was the best job I ever had and the experience I gained launched my career. Looking back, I honestly believe the best lessons that I have learned came from the time I spent being a DSP. The real-life experiences and knowledge, background and strength I gained when I was a DSP have helped me make practical decisions that are more focused on the people we support, rather than my own self-interests.

Direct Support Professional is more than a title and DSP is more than an acronym. The support of great DSPs provides people with opportunities that aren't just goals in their ISPs. They are real. We know that people, regardless of their disabilities have strengths and skills. They have real-life desires, whether it is marriage and having a family, owning a home, having a job, earning a great wage, accessing their community, having a social network of friends and so much more. These dreams become a reality through the support DSPs provide.

I'm constantly reminded of the worth of the DSPs in Ohio. We know your value and we know the positive impact that you make on Ohioans with developmental disabilities. The workforce crisis is real. Without an adequate number of trained DSPs, we fail a very vulnerable and deserving population.

Over the past five decades, we have seen dramatic changes with DD supports. The shift from a one-size fits-all, institutional model to a person-centered focus has offered the opportunity for people to live in less-restrictive settings, become empowered to take control over their decisions and live happy, fulfilling lives based on what they want.

As we embark on the future, we know that it is likely that the our system of supports will become more refined to meet the needs for people with developmental disabilities and, as we have seen over the past years, a decline in available DSPs will continue to occur if we don't do something now. Stating that we are in a workforce crisis is only a basic description of what we are experiencing. Instead, we are on the verge of a complete system failure that none of us here today want to happen. We find more and more provider agencies not accepting new people to support because they cannot find staff. We see unprecedented turnover rates that lead to a lack of consistent services. DSPs are often required to work multiple shifts in a row, which leads to fatigue and poor judgment. And, failure to raise wages diminishes the true value of the work DSPs perform. All of these issues have the same result — the quality of work and individual outcomes suffer. Not only are DSPs negatively impacted, but so are the people we are trusted to support. This cannot continue to happen.

Potential solutions are easy to come up with, but the implementation and hurdles that have to be navigated are very difficult. We know that:

- If wages were sufficient, it is likely that DSPs wouldn't have to rely on a second and sometimes a third jobs to survive financially. This would also lead to a greater quality of life, less anxiety and fatigue and work-life balance. Everyone deserves a livable wage.
- Educating people that the DD system is a viable employer can benefit us. We need to expand our pool of applicants in non-traditional ways to encourage job seekers to consider the DD system as an option for their career path.
- We need to look at improving the training and making sure that DSPs have the tools needed before they are placed on the job. A friend of mine, Pete Moore, told me something that I think is important to share. A commercial he heard not long ago proclaimed that Valvoline Instant Oil Change technicians receive 270 hours of training before they are allowed to work on your car. That's 6.75 weeks of training. Qualified people working on our cars is important, but it left him thinking about how much training time we invest in our direct care staff. If Valvoline invests that much time in their employees shouldn't we consider following their lead? Pete added that he believes the investment in quality training will improve skills, build confidence and will result in great customer service and even better outcomes! I agree with Pete. What's important to add is that I know that providers across the state are in agreement on the importance of training. But way too often, staff receive the minimal amount of training because they are needed to fill the many DSP vacancies that agencies have because the need for support is increasing. We greatly appreciate the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities offering a competency-based increase in pay, as well as training programs that the Ohio Alliance for Direct Support Professions offer and other creative ways that providers use to train their staff. However, in the end, the real hurdle exists because of our workforce crisis, not because the desire to provide more training isn't there.
- We need to continue to increase the utilization of technology. This is a great alternative that can free up needed resources and empower more independence. While technology works for some, it is not for everyone, therefore establishing a strong foundation of DSPs is just as important. We cannot loose track of this need.
- And another thing. We must continue to improve our collaborative relationships and work together with a common cause because the only way to deal with this crisis is to work together.

Every DSP deserves our full attention and support, which will help ensure that we can continue to provide needed supports for Ohioans with developmental disabilities. If we don't take care of the foundation of our system, there is no way that we will be able to continue to function in the future.

Thank you for your commitment, your innovation, your support and your willingness to go above and beyond to see the true potential that every Ohioan with a developmental disability has and the valuable contribution you make in their lives. Never forget that when we truly focus on a mutual mission, we learn together and strengthen our alliance. So let's continue to work together to address our workforce crisis.

Thank you.

