



**THE TRUE PROFESSIONAL™**

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# **Foundational Development for the Direct Support Professional**

**How Instilling a Framework for Professionalism  
Improves the Quality of Services Provided to People  
With Disabilities**

September 2024

# Executive Summary

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# Executive Summary

Direct Support Professionals (“DSPs”) who provide a myriad of critical services to individuals with disabilities<sup>1</sup> are often the unsung heroes of the disability community. DSPs are charged with supporting individuals with disabilities to become more independent, by enabling them to *do for themselves* rather than having others *do for them*. DSPs serve individuals with diverse challenges, including developmental, intellectual, behavioral, and medical needs, throughout their lifespan. In particular, DSPs working in the residential environment have a uniquely demanding role, given the rigorous nature of the work and the informality of the home setting. DSPs must have a foundational understanding of professionalism and how to provide excellence in service delivery by ensuring that they must always think of *what is in the best interest of the client*.<sup>2</sup> This knowledge needs to be steeped in a framework of how to communicate and collaborate with all stakeholders, the importance of being consistently engaged with their clients, and how to comport themselves as a professional at all times.

The True Professional (“TTP”), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization,<sup>3</sup> has developed a program to address the issues raised above. The following details A) the need to professionalize DSPs, B) The True Professional’s DSP development program to enable excellence in service delivery, and C) TTP’s data proven impact thus far.

## I. The Need to Professionalize the Direct Support Professional

The quality of services for individuals with disabilities is tied directly to the training and performance of the DSPs who provide those services.<sup>4</sup> Despite their dedication, many factors can impede their efforts to provide optimal quality of service, such as: training limitations, the nature of the work and informality of the setting, a lack of collaboration and communication (both within and across shifts and stakeholders), and low compensation.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR Office of Disability Employment Policy, Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/program-areas/individuals/DSP>

<sup>2</sup> Individuals with disabilities are first and foremost people. TTP recognizes and respects that words matter and that people have different preferences for the words used to describe themselves. For clarity purposes, throughout this document and TTP’s program, TTP uses the word “client” to refer to the people who are receiving services as distinguished from the people who are delivering services.

<sup>3</sup> TTP is a New Jersey nonprofit corporation accorded tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

<sup>4</sup> American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Direct Support Professionals (DSP) Workforce, *Joint Position Statement of AAIDD and NADSP* (adopted May 18, 2016).

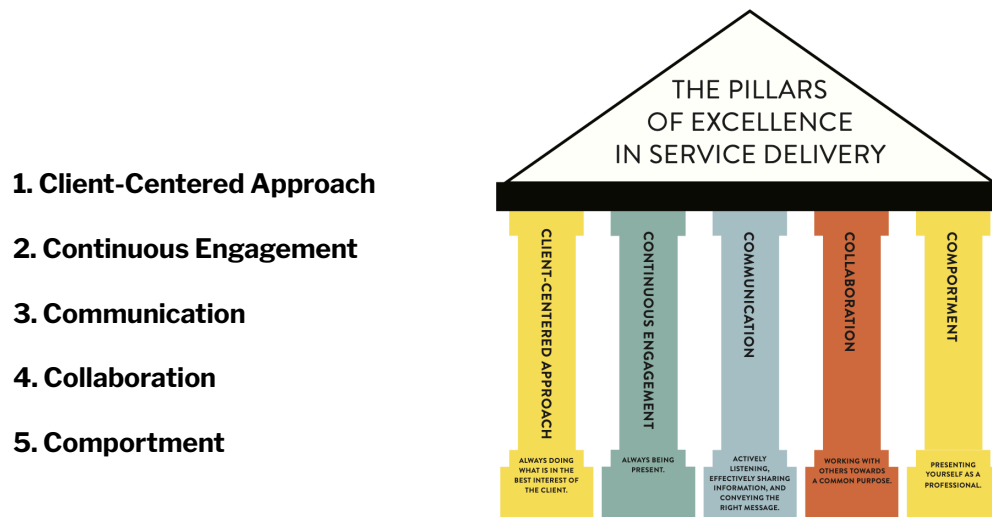
[https://www.aidd.org/news-policy/policy/position-statements/direct-support-professionals-\(dsp\)-workforce](https://www.aidd.org/news-policy/policy/position-statements/direct-support-professionals-(dsp)-workforce)

Of course, DSPs receive important training in many operational and regulatorily required areas, such as service documentation, CPR, medical administration, etc. They do not, however, generally receive professional development in the critical “soft skills needed to excel in their work, and mentorship relating to the importance of their role and the impact they have on their clients. This type of development is foundational to their ability to deliver high quality services. In the absence of such foundational development as a professional,<sup>5</sup> the quality of service that DSPs provide is negatively impacted, as is their job satisfaction, retention, safety, and many other areas. Thus, TTP was created as the bridge to the gap in DSP development.

## II. The True Professional (“TTP”) Program’s Hypothesis and Process

**Based on the concepts of professionalism and excellence in client service, TTP addresses a crucial gap in DSP development by furnishing DSPs with the toolset necessary to provide the quality of services their clients deserve, while instilling the DSPs with an increased level of self-respect and job satisfaction.**

To address the gap in DSP professional development, TTP created its program based on the concept of excellence in client service. The program is taught by a combined team of clinical and business professionals, as well as parents of individuals with disabilities who have studied residential options nationwide for many years and developed such programs. TTP has developed a proprietary framework, referred to as **The 5 Cs™**, which details the pillars of excellence in service delivery, as set forth below.



Through the prism of **The 5 Cs™**, TTP’s professional development course covers DSP role-specific topics that are not generally covered in depth. These topics include the journey of a client’s family leading to the need for residential services, the importance of stakeholder collaboration, individual leadership and accountability, as well as the value of sharing

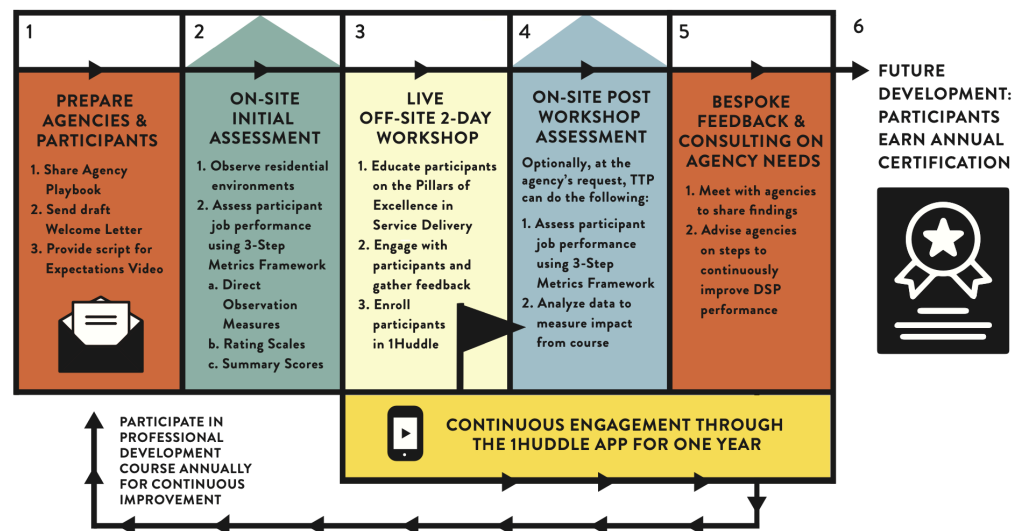
<sup>5</sup> Throughout this document, the terms “foundational development” and “professional development” are used interchangeably.

feedback with others to improve services by using the TTP provided roadmap for effectively providing feedback.

It is crucially important that DSPs in the residential setting and their managers have a clear and shared framework to maintain excellence in client service. This is particularly challenging due to the informality of the setting, boundary complexity involved in supporting individuals in private spaces and personal matters, lack of shift coordination, and lack of structure often inherent in evening and weekend shifts. While the program is designed to work for all staff who provide direct support services to individuals with disabilities, TTP's initial focus is on DSPs in the residential setting, as this is one of the most demanding areas.

TTP's process flow is set forth below:

### PROGRAM PROCESS FLOW



TTP's process begins with an initial assessment to understand how the residence operates, the needs of the residents, the interaction pattern between the DSPs and residents, and the current quality of services. This assessment is followed by an intensive and multifaceted professional development workshop. The workshop itself consists of two consecutive days of five-hour live sessions, which include direct teaching, interactive discussions using hypothetical scenarios, and role-playing.

The workshop is followed by a one-year access to 1Huddle, a mobile app, which provides continuous engagement in short bursts of training through additional scenario reviews that are in the form of games. Additionally, the 1Huddle platform provides DSPs with a variety of other online courses in a library of both personal and professional development topics on an unlimited basis

TTP's team can return to the residence to observe and collect data on post workshop performance for all DSPs who participated in the course. This allows TTP to assess the effectiveness of the workshop by observing DSP performance post workshop.

Together, these various program components provide DSPs and leadership of their employers with the framework and support needed to instill a dedication to excellence in client service, a philosophy of professionalism, and the practical skills needed to succeed and become leaders in their field.

### III. TTP Pilot and Results

#### A. Data Analytics

To confirm its hypothesis, TTP conducted a pilot with three diverse residential service providers, across seven homes, which varied in size and client population, to assess the effectiveness of, and stakeholder satisfaction with, TTP's program. The results of TTP's pilot were extraordinary.

Using quantitative and qualitative data collected before and after the development course, TTP's analytics revealed that the overwhelming majority of participants increased their delivery of quality service across the five pillars of excellence in service delivery, including: increased focus on client needs, higher rates of engagement with clients, better communication between DSPs and residents, more collaboration between team members, and heightened professional comportment. Specifically, the data revealed:

##### 1. Overall Increase in Performance Levels

An overwhelming majority of participants demonstrated an increase in competence relating to each of the five pillars of excellence in service delivery, proving that the course was extremely effective at increasing the skillfulness of the DSPs. The data revealed:

###### a. Increase in Performance Levels on Individual Pillars

Across each individual pillar, a range of 11% to 44% competence level before the workshop and a range of **76%** to **94%** competence level post workshop. Accordingly, the percentage increase in competence level across the various pillars ranged from **102%** to **700%**;

###### b. Increase in Performance Levels across Three or More Pillars

Upon initial assessment, 17% of the participants met criterion on 3 or more of the 5 pillars of excellence in service delivery, and **89%** in the post workshop assessment, reflecting an increase in competence of **433%**; and

###### c. Increase in Performance Levels across All Five Pillars

Upon initial assessment, 11% of participants met criterion on all 5 pillars of excellence, and **67%** in the post workshop assessment, reflecting an increase of **500%**.

## **2. Differential Effectiveness Across Participant Levels**

The program had a differential effect, in that those in greater need of improvement demonstrated a greater increase in skill development;

## **3. Mobile App Usage Correlation**

Participants who engaged with the mobile app influenced their peers to engage with the app and showed greater increases in competency;

## **4. Consistency of Results**

The course was consistently effective across different types of agency employers, DSP years of experience,, or individual residents' needs within a home; and

## **5. Impact of Manager Engagement**

Effective managers, who provided leadership and leveraged TTP material, positively influenced and enhanced DSP performance.

# **B. Feedback The Participants and The Employer Agencies**

## **1. The Participants**

Participants in the pilot provided overwhelmingly positive feedback. They collectively shared that they had never received this type of foundational development, nor had they received any development related to topics such as client service, communication, leadership, and partnership. The following are some of the key themes that were echoed by participants from both cohorts, and across all three agencies.

### **a) The workshop was meaningful and engaging.**

Participants noted that they enjoyed the interactive format of the workshop, which kept them engaged in discussion with workshop facilitators and fellow participants throughout its entirety. As one participant expressed, "It's not just talking AT us; you know, telling us what the training is. You also allowed us to give our input."

Participants shared that they felt the use of scenarios specific to their work environment made the workshop content relatable to their everyday life, and that

the use of quotations meaningfully connected the training to their aspirational goals. As one participant said, “It was very relatable. We can all relate, even though we live in different counties and work in different homes. We can apply it to our job and we can apply certain things we learned here today to our personal life.”

**b) The workshop environment promoted professionalism and respect.**

Participants overwhelmingly reported that they were treated as equals by the course instructors, which fostered an environment of mutual respect and collegiality. The result is that participants were comfortable being open and honest about their professional experiences, including their challenges and where they felt they needed to improve. This not only made the workshop a more positive experience for participants, but it made it more effective as well.

**c) The family perspective was invaluable.**

It was clear from participants’ feedback that learning about the journey a family of an individual with disabilities goes through was profoundly eye opening. Having that journey, from childhood through the need for residential care in adulthood, shared by one of the course instructors gave them insight into a perspective that shifted how they viewed their own relationships with the families of their residents and their orientation towards the course material. As one participant put it:

The way we’re going to relate to the parents because seeing you, like using yourself as an example, you know that means a lot of people are going through the same situation. So we will know how to deal with them, to relay to them the positive things they want to hear about their children- about the individuals.

To quote another participant, the inclusion of the family perspective made the training “broader” and “personal” in a way that was unique to any other professional development they had received.



## 2. The Agencies

Leadership from the 3 agencies that participated in the pilot provided extremely positive feedback about the impact that the TTP course had on the DSPs. Agency leadership reported significant increased job engagement, confidence, and satisfaction by DSPs who participated in the course. The parental perspective provided, including sharing extensive personal experience, was particularly appreciated for its authenticity and emotional resonance. Professionally, the facilitators’ ability to connect with participants on a personal level, was well-received, and the interactive nature of the workshop was praised. Managers and DSPs enjoyed networking with other agencies, which fostered a sense of identity and boosted their confidence. The workshop was deemed beneficial for navigating difficult situations, improving engagement during crises, and understanding effective resident interactions.

## IV. Next Steps and Recommendations

Based on TTP’s experience, market research, and detailed data analytics from the pilot, TTP has developed the following list of priorities, broken out into A) next steps to undertake as an organization and B) recommendations for the residential services industry.

### A. Next Steps for TTP

TTP’s Pilot, conducted in the Spring of 2024, affirmed its hypothesis that instilling professionalism and a philosophy of excellence in client service in DSPs would elevate the

quality of services for individuals with disabilities. TTP is now poised to address the urgent and profound need for professional development among the DSPs in New Jersey, a market of more than 30,000 current professionals.

TTP's priorities are set forth below:

**1. Grow to new markets and deepen agency partnerships**

TTP plans to expand its outreach to new agencies and work across additional regions of New Jersey. It also will work to deepen its partnerships with a limited number of agencies to serve a significant portion of their DSP workforce, and thus demonstrate the transformational impact of having a critical mass of DSPs within a given agency participate in TTP's professional development course.

**2. Strategically build upon program and expand service offerings**

TTP will continue to build upon its program in strategic ways, notably by providing bespoke consulting and coaching services in accordance with its philosophy and developing additional professional development courses.

TTP also will also continue to refine the 1Huddle curriculum and engagement tactics.

Additionally, TTP will develop a certification program, the goal of which will ultimately be to increase wages for DSPs who successfully complete TTP's professional development course and pass a corresponding test, and for employers who have a majority of their DSPs and managers certified by TTP, as part of their ongoing development process.

**3. Fundraise to support growth and operations**

TTP plans to launch a fundraising effort targeted toward both private and public funding sources. TTP is seeking funding partners who share TTP's mission of elevating the quality of service for individuals with disabilities and want to support its urgently important work at this critical early stage of growth. TTP will seek to acquire grant funding, private donations, and to partner with other non-profit organizations and federal, state and local governments to meet its funding needs.

**B. Recommendations for the Residential Services Industry**

To realize the full potential of each DSP in New Jersey, TTP recommends that residential agencies undertake the steps set forth below:

**1. Promote widespread participation in professional development for DSPs**

The effectiveness of TTP's development course as determined by the pilot data and agency feedback suggests that this course should become part of the regularly scheduled training for all DSPs and their managers.

**2. Require professional development as part of DSP orientation and prioritize it for DSPs needing remediation**

DSPs who are newer to an organization or who display the need for remediation in numerous areas addressed by this course should be selected first from an agency to ensure maximum outcomes for the agency.

**3. Ensure residential managers buy-in and participate in professional development for their staff**

Managers and DSP staff should participate in the development course together, with all staff from a house participating in the program at or near the same time to maximize team implementation of the tactics and strategies set forth in the course.

## **V. Conclusion**

To improve the quality of residential services to people with disabilities, it is essential to provide DSPs with foundational development opportunities that enable them to prioritize excellence in client service. To achieve this quality of client service, TTP's program pragmatically guides DSPs as to how to provide such service. When DSPs learn to focus on excellence in service delivery by A) taking a client-centered approach, B) consistently engaging with residents, C) communicating effectively, D) collaborating with others, and E) demonstrating professional comportment, they not only improve the quality of life for those they support, but they also find greater job satisfaction and self-confidence. TTP provides a unique, thoughtful, and data driven approach to improving the quality of residential services.