

## Stabilize the Direct Support Workforce for People with Disabilities

### BACKGROUND

Services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are a unique marriage of the private sector and the public good. Provider agencies offer essential, close-contact supports to assist people with their most basic daily needs. These services are delivered through a dedicated workforce of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs).

*A Direct Support Professional, or DSP, is a worker who assists a person with disabilities to lead a fulfilling life in the community through a diverse range of services, such as helping them get ready in the morning, take medication, find a job, and participate in social activities. Many of these essential services cannot be suspended due to staffing shortages.*

### THE PROBLEM

Colorado has been recognized as a leader in supporting the IDD community throughout the pandemic with temporary rate enhancements, regulatory flexibilities, and more. While these efforts were critical to mitigate worst-case scenarios, the workforce issues that previously existed only continue to worsen as the pandemic lingers and new variants emerge. The pressures and risks associated with providing essential, close-contact supports during a pandemic have exacerbated longstanding workforce shortages attributable to low wages and high responsibility in direct support jobs. For decades, IDD providers have struggled to compete with other entry-level employers such as fast-food chains and large retailers whose jobs involve less complexity and personal risk, often at higher wages. We can no longer keep up. Despite increasing wages, recruitment and referral bonuses, and other incentives, IDD providers are experiencing more difficulty than ever in recruiting the critical workforce that supports Coloradans with IDD.

Many providers are temporarily closing programs due to staff shortages and transferring staff to in-home services that cannot be suspended. Some have even had to bring in help from the National Guard to make sure needs are met. Providers are turning away new referrals, delaying the launch of new services, and facing unsustainable turnover costs. The DSPs who remain are exhausted. Most important are the impacts on people with IDD, who can't access the full range of supports and are stressed from having new staff cycling in and out of their residences to help them with their most intimate needs.

*Colorado's direct support workforce has never been in a more precarious position.*

### THE SOLUTION

- **Make permanent the reimbursement rate increases implemented through the American Rescue Plan Act**, which support a \$15/hour base wage for DSPs. Without continuation of this funding, a significant wage cliff will create an exodus among DSPs beginning in 2024.
- **Provide a rate increase equal to the Denver-Aurora-Lakewood CPI for those IDD services left out of the ARPA targeted increase, including Targeted Case Management, Behavioral, and Professional Services.** Providers are experiencing the same workforce challenges for these services which will be further exacerbated by high inflation.