REPORT OF FINDINGS
INTRODUCTION

Recruiting and retaining Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) continues to be a challenge for Koinonia, particularly in light of low unemployment, increased workforce mobility and ever-increasing demand for healthcare and personal care providers. Further, the demands of the job, low wages and lack of professional status make for an unsatisfying work experience, over the long term. As a result, like many similarly situated organizations, Koinonia is challenged by disruptive turnover, employee burnout and high costs of replacing employees who exit.

Although Koinonia has taken many positive steps toward reducing turnover and enhancing retention, traditional recruitment and retention methods no longer work as effectively as they once did. Competition for low-skill workers has compelled organizations to increase wages, develop proactive retention programs and continuously access diverse channels from which to source qualified candidates.

Today, Koinonia strives to stay ahead of the imminent talent crisis. To that end, the organization has sponsored a comprehensive study of DSP turnover and retention, in order to gain insight on improving its ability to attract, develop and retain vital talent on a sustainable basis.

This report provides a summary of findings from this study and outlines recommendations for enhancing Koinonia’s talent management capabilities.

RESEARCH

Literature Review & Summary

The issues of DSP recruitment and retention have been studied by industry experts, scholars and special interest groups. A list of sources that were consulted for this study is contained in the Appendix of this document.

There is notable consistency among these various research efforts with the following themes being the most pervasive:

• Low wages are a significant factor in DSP turnover.
• DSPs seek higher wages and better working conditions, therefore seek opportunities outside the caregiving industry.
• Work/life balance issues impact the DSPs ability to manage work schedules.
• Job stress, isolation and burnout greatly impact turnover activity.
• Lack of professional status may create more transiency in DSP job category.
• High tenured DSPs stay in the job for reasons of personal satisfaction and as a manageable second job.

Together, the researchers hold the prevailing view that “professionalizing” the DSP role is critical to establishing a long-term solution to high turnover. This would include addressing wage issues, elevating the status of the DSP role, institutionalizing career pathing and enhancing the overall work experience by improving organizational capabilities, such as supervisor and cohort relations. Further,
the research cites the need to address the well-being of the DSP workforce by reducing stress and providing enhanced support for the more challenging aspects of the job.

Internal Data Collection & Summary

To provide a full picture of the DSP turnover and retention issue, this study explored the sentiments of incumbents in the DSP at Koinonia role using the following methods of inquiry:

- **On-line Survey**: The on-line survey was distributed by ERC to the entire DSP staff. The survey questions inquired about wages, work relationships, training and work schedules. The survey was designed in consultation with Dr. Amy Hewitt and Dr. Sandra Pettingell of the Institute of Community Integration at the University of Minnesota; both experts in the field of DSP staffing issues.

- **Paper & Pencil Survey**: In addition to the on-line survey, the organization sponsored a manual survey that was proctored by an ERC consultant at Koinonia’s all-staff meeting on July 23, 2019. The survey inquired about supervisory support, co-worker relationships, recognition and included an overall “net promoter score” that assessed how likely the DSP was to recommend Koinonia as a place to work.

- **Focus Groups**: Three focus groups were conducted and included DSPs from various locations across the organization. The focus group inquiries included questions related to “a-day-in-the-life of a DSP”, supervisor and co-worker relationships, as well as discussions about why DSPs stay or leave the organization. The focus groups were facilitated by an ERC consultant and were about one hour in duration.

The prevailing themes from the surveys indicate the following:

- Respondents have a generally positive sentiment about the job, in regard to its impact and importance to the client.
- The most frequently cited reasons for turnover were low wages, lack of recognition, isolation and job stress/burnout.
- Communications and being included in decisions were important features of job satisfaction.
- Supervisory support was an important factor in retention.
- Overall, respondents gave an 8.11 score (out of 10) when asked to rate “How likely are you to recommend working at Koinonia to a friend or colleague?”

The focus groups surfaced more in-depth feedback about the DSP overall work experience. Several participants indicated that the job was very stressful, especially when dealing with clients whose behavior can be disruptive and violent. Participants cited the need to work overtime, in order to “make ends meet”; sometimes working as much as 15 hours of overtime in a week. This created concerns about burn-out and work/life balance.

Internal Data Collection & Summary (continued) The focus groups also shared the following concerns:

- Lack of work ethic of new hires.
- Employees spend time on their phones and don’t work.
Pay is very low and other employers pay more.
Some supervisors show favoritism and do not address problems.
Supervisors don't help when needed.
DSPs would value connecting with other DSPs and building relationships.
The stress of daily living and the DSP job is very wearing and hard on family.
Management does not visit work sites and experience the daily work.
DSPs stay because they love their clients, not because of the money or benefits.
Participants rated Koinonia a good place to work because of the people and clients.
Koinonia needs to do a better job of hiring the right people and getting them trained.

External Benchmarking & Summary

This study also involved external benchmarking to assess the current state of wage levels and organizational practices, related to the DSP or similar positions. This study focused on similarly situated organizations, as well as organizations outside of the direct care industry that could compete for similar talent.

Wages

This study presumed that Cuyahoga County and surrounding areas known as Northeast Ohio is the appropriate recruiting radius for Koinonia. As a reference point, the research indicates that the Living Wage for Cuyahoga County is $10.77. (Dr. Amy K. Glasmeier, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2019).

Today, the starting wage for a DSP at Koinonia is approximately $10.00/hour. The benchmarking data show that wage rates for similar roles, or roles that would compete for similar talent are, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Average Wage (Northeast Ohio)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State Tested Nursing Assistant (STNA)</td>
<td>$12.00 – $14.00/hour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Home Health Aide</td>
<td>$10.00 – $11.00/hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starbucks Barista</td>
<td>$8.50 – $11.50/hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walmart Cashier/Customer Service Associate</td>
<td>$15.00/hour</td>
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<tr>
<td>COSTCO Customer Service Associate</td>
<td>$15.00/hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amazon Fulfillment Center Associate or Driver</td>
<td>$15.00/hour</td>
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Sources: Glassdoor, PayScale, Indeed.com, direct inquiry to Human Resources.

Organizational Practices

The benchmarking information that was collected regarding organization practices to combat turnover suggests that the most effective strategies target specific organizational issues. It is important to note that the research is clear that “one size does not fit all. However, there are “best practices” that can inform DSP turnover and retention strategies at Koinonia. The following provides three overarching “best practice” strategies that can serve as a basis for developing more Koinonia-specific actions.

1) Reposition and elevate the DSP role to “mission critical” status and align human resources practices (hiring, training, pay and rewards, etc.) to reflect the high value of the role and respond to the scarcity of talent in the market.

2) Create a culture of “belonging” and “value”. Build affinity and inclusion by establishing consistent, relevant and meaningful communications and interactions with the population.
3) Create targeted centers of support that proactively address individual work and personal issues, in order to minimize disruption and manage stress.

The external and internal data provide the organization with a multi-faceted view of the DSP condition and gives meaningful guidance on creating impactful strategies to enhance the DSP work experience, thus increasing the likelihood of retention.

The following provides a discussion of the research and some context for Koinonia’s going forward strategy for optimizing DSP retention.

**DISCUSSION**

The issue of DSP turnover and retention is a complex one. There are many aspects of the employee's work experience that impact their propensity to stay with the organization. Each individual employee has his or her own motivations and expectations, thus requiring a high level of precision in creating processes and programs to minimize employee exits.

As shown in the research that was reviewed for this study, the trends cast a bleak picture, in regard to the availability of workers who are skilled and are likely to stay with an organization for several years. The external data, as well as the internal “voice of the DSP” paint a clear picture. There is a compelling need to focus on these key areas of the DSP work experience:

- Status and Value
- Affinity and Inclusion
- Professional and Personal Support

Some would argue that DSPs engage in their work and stay with an organization for the gratification and satisfaction that it brings, which is undoubtedly true. However, the realities of personal financial viability can make it difficult to forego a job with a higher wage, regardless if the job brings the same level of satisfaction. Therefore, the financial forces of the competitive labor market are of significant concern in vying for DSP talent and organizations must respond with strategies outside the bounds of traditional practices by delivering pay and rewards that respond to the scarcity of talent in the labor market.

Further, the challenges of the job and daily life have a significant impact on the DSP role, thus making a compelling case for a “laser-like” focus on the well-being and sense of belonging for the DSP population. Research tells us that affinity, belongingness and a sense of well-being at work are significant drivers of retention therefore, efforts to build a meaningful identity for the DSP and create a vibrant community of support both at the individual and team level can effectively fortify engagement and increase the DSP’s propensity to stay with the organization.

Koinonia is alert to the emerging trends in workforce deployment in the direct care sector and has taken many steps to engage and retain its DSP team. By intensifying those efforts and adopting other innovative strategies, it can position itself as a leader in workforce deployment and development in the caregiving industry. Not only will this contain costs and minimize disruption, it will make a significant contribution Koinonia’s mission to provide an outstanding client experience.
The following section presents the Recommendations and Action Plans from this study. Some recommendations are currently underway, with the remaining initiatives scheduled throughout 2020. The Chief Quality Officer and Chief People Officer reviewed these recommendations and provided guidance on appropriate timelines.
## RECOMMENDATIONS & ACTION PLANS

### Staffing & Recruiting

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Action Plan</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cultivate one or two meaningful relationships with educational institutions to offer internships, co-ops and other training opportunities.</td>
<td>Koinonia’s Chief People Officer (CPO) is working with Director Jeffrey Davis of the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities to initiate a comprehensive outreach program designed to cultivate an ongoing relationship with targeted learning institutions. Timeline: Begin October, 2019.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide resources and programs to encourage participation (scholarships, sponsorships). Extend the relationship to include “exclusive’ recruitment access to graduates. Brand the program to create visibility and relevance.</td>
<td>Profiles will be developed as part of the overall recruiting process reengineering initiative that is being sponsored by the Chief Quality Officer (CQO) and the Chief People Officer (CPO). Timeline: Begin September, 2019.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create “Success Profiles” that articulate key competencies of successful and long-term DSPs and utilize these profiles in the assessment and selection process. Focus on specific behavioral and personality characteristics that contribute to high performance and retention.</td>
<td>Current job previews and site visits will be reviewed and refreshed as part of the overall recruiting process reengineering project, noted above. Timeline: Begin September, 2019.</td>
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<td>Create realistic job previews inclusive of “day-in-the-life” scenarios. Offer previews via technology and as part of the interviewing process.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Build employee referral programs that are highly targeted to the communities in which successful DSPs participate. Create affinity programs for these communities and offer meaningful rewards for employment referrals.</td>
<td>Targeted programs will be reviewed and implemented to increase the yield from employee referral programs as part of the overall recruiting process reengineering initiative that is being sponsored by the Chief Quality Officer (CQO) and the Chief People Officer (CPO). Timeline: Begin September, 2019</td>
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### Pay & Rewards

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<tr>
<td>Identify DSPs as “mission critical” talent and elevate the job to high value status in the organization. Rebrand DSP job to reflect professional status and align organizational practices (hiring, training, pay and rewards, credentialing, engagement), accordingly.</td>
<td>Koinonia is piloting a Career Path program that will contribute to the “professionalization” of the DSP role. As DSPs progress in their development, they will receive a compensation adjustment. Pilot group will be approximately 120 DSP for the Basic certification level. Additional DSPs will be considered for Level 2 and Supervisory certification. Timeline: Pilot is targeted for implementation in early, 2020.</td>
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<td>Provide paid “well-being days” to DSPs to offset burnout and stress.</td>
<td>Currently, not all PTO is taken as “time off”, rather is accumulated and taken as pay or a loan. Supervisors and mentors will monitor DSPs need for time off and encourage them to consider taking their PTO time. Timeline: Implement in concurrence with Supervisory and Mentoring training.</td>
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<td>Implement quarterly “stay” bonuses.</td>
<td>Koinonia is implementing three (3) compensation “touch points” in 2020, including performance adjustments, base pay adjustments and year-end bonuses. Timeline: Performance (Q1, 2020), Base Pay (July, 2020), Bonus (December, 2020).</td>
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## Supervision & Support

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<td>Provide intensive supervisory training that is focused on the emotionally intelligent leader. Implement on-going and confidential feedback mechanisms to uncover problematic supervisors and address issues in a timely fashion.</td>
<td>“Leading the Koinonia Way” is underway and leaders/supervisors will attend one learning experience per quarter. Additional Manager/Supervisor training will be revamped to include more intensive training per the Ohio Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (OADSP) curriculum. Timeline: Q1 – Q4, 2020. Ongoing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establish “Retention Coaches” who regularly circulate among the work sites to create collegial and collaborative interactions, as well as uncover and address issues.</td>
<td>Koinonia is implementing a mentoring program that will be designed to focus on retention and addressing early signs of turnover. The program will include specialized tools to address retention issues. Timeline: Q2, 2020.</td>
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<td>Implement “stay interviews” and/or focus groups to build affinity and proactively address problems.</td>
<td>Tools such as “stay interviews” and focus groups will be incorporated in the mentoring program.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create “engagement profiles” that identify key drivers of retention for each DSP. Equip “Retention Coaches” with profiles to proactively identify retention issues and opportunities to prevent turnover.</td>
<td>Tools such as “engagement profiles” will be incorporated in the mentoring program.</td>
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<td>Create a DSP “chat room” for facilitated conversations among staff.</td>
<td>Koinonia is implementing the “I CARE” program to create a more engaged and inclusive work experience. The program will include an employee advisory team as well as enhanced, multi-faceted communications strategies to improve employee connectivity to each other and the organization. Employee “chat rooms” are under consideration, as part of this initiative. Timeline: In process.</td>
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<td>Provide recognition at the “local” level to ensure DSPs are acknowledged in front of peers.</td>
<td>Recognition programs will be reviewed and revamped as part of the “I CARE” initiative, noted above.</td>
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<td>Establish leadership team “rounds” for visiting sites and engaging with staff.</td>
<td>Leadership engagement will be reviewed as part of the “I CARE” initiative.</td>
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**Development**

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<td>Implement “development days” to focus on specific skill- and team-building in a cohort setting.</td>
<td>Incorporate this approach in career pathing and manager/supervisory training programs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sponsor a study to assess the viability and cost/benefit of a Koinonia-branded DSP credentialing program that could be an industry-leading program for DSP development.</td>
<td>Koinonia will assess the viability of a credentialing program upon completion of the Career Path pilot program and mentoring program.</td>
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In closing, we offer this visual representation of how the recommendations that are outlined in this study support “The Koinonia Way” model of engagement and empowerment. It is clear that the actions being sponsored by the organization will align with the strategic objective of the organization and will demonstrate Koinonia’s leadership in workforce engagement.

THE KOINONIA WAY

A collaborative environment that empowers and motivates people to do their best every day.

- Mentoring
- Supervisory Training
- Chat rooms
- Advisory Group
- Recognition

- Innovative pay programs.
- “Best practice” recruiting strategies.
- DSP Career Pathing.

- Career Pathing.
- Chat rooms.
- DSP Career Paths
- Supervisory Training.
- Mentoring.
Project Team

Dr. Amy Hewitt, Senior Research Associate. Research & Training Center on Community Living. Institute on Community Integration. University of Minnesota.

Dr. Sandra Pettingell, Research Associate. Research & Training Center on Community Living. Institute on Community Integration. University of Minnesota.

Diane McNally, Ph.D. – ERC Consultant.

Diana Rosa - Chief Quality Officer, Koinonia.

Jamie Strong – ERC Associate.

Julie Wagner - Chief People Officer, Koinonia.
RESEARCH RESOURCES


“Report to the President 2017: America's Direct Support Workforce Crisis”. President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities


End of Report