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**Staff Retention Among Direct Support Workers in Wisconsin  
A Passion for Their Work Fuels Longevity and Commitment  
Among a Dedicated Core of Workers**

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**A Survey Research Project Conducted by  
Melissa Mulliken Consulting  
Sally Mather Associates**

**On behalf of  
The Wisconsin Council of Developmental Disabilities  
The Bureau of Developmental Disabilities Services**

**July 2002**

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## **Overview of the Research: Project Rationale and Focus**

Businesses in the United States spend nearly two-thirds of their operating budgets on labor and the costs associated with it. With the trends toward a smaller workforce, more employee turnover - almost every industry except government has seen a decrease in employee tenure during the past 15 years - and the significant costs associated with replacing workers<sup>1</sup>, finding ways to retain qualified, committed workers is both a challenge and a necessity for employers.

For human service agencies that serve individuals with developmental disabilities, there is an added pressure when it comes to retaining capable, caring and dedicated direct support workers: it can mean a better quality of life for the people the agency serves. The continuity that comes from having an experienced direct support worker improves the safety, well being and the comfort level for both the person with the disability and his or her family.

### ***Looking to See Who Stays...and Why: Measuring Job Satisfaction***

The Wisconsin Council on Developmental Disabilities (WCDD) and the Bureau of Developmental Disabilities Services (the Bureau) have conducted numerous public hearings and workshops during which agencies, people with developmental disabilities, their loved ones and families have repeatedly raised the issue of how difficult - and important - it is to retain direct support workers.

Likewise, a national literature search<sup>2</sup> turned up a number of reports and descriptions of retention issues. They cite the high turnover and staff shortages that many human services agencies face and they focus on the barriers to keeping good workers such as poor pay, inadequate benefits, the low status of the work, high caseloads and burdensome overtime demands.

In this project, however, the focus was not on what makes employees leave but rather on what makes them stay. Anguished employers and families of people with developmental disabilities don't ask why direct support workers leave their jobs - they too understand the challenges all too well - but they

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1 According to Walker Information, Inc. ([www.walkerinfo.com](http://www.walkerinfo.com)), "Since 1979, there has been a marked decrease in the number of people available to work in the U.S. In that year there was a 3.5% net increase in employees. In the mid-1990s this number fell to 1.2%, and this year the net increase is expected to be just .4%. We'll witness the first net decrease in employees in 2012." Walker also cites, "A Mercer study concluded that the average expense of replacing a worker today is \$30,000."

2 The literature search was conducted as part of the WCDD/Bureau research project into job satisfaction and retention. Although not exhaustive, the review included studies, surveys, focus group findings and other literature having to do with workforce issues for direct support providers and agencies. Recurring issues regarding workforce development were identified and, as appropriate, incorporated into the WCDD/Bureau survey instrument.

have often pleaded for answers about how to keep the good workers they do find. Improving employee retention begins with understanding employee satisfaction and any initiative to improve *how long* employees stay with an agency or in the field must be grounded in an understanding of *why* they stay and *what* aspects of their job they value.

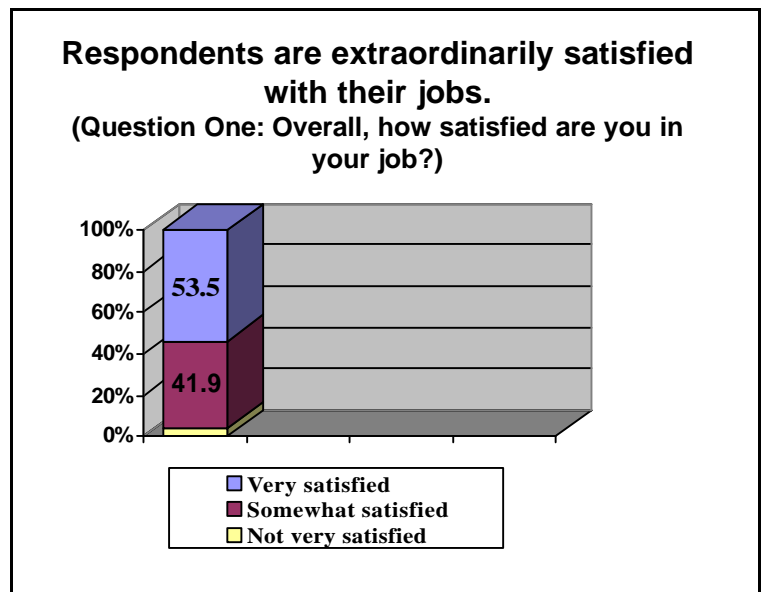
The best way to understand employee satisfaction is to ask the employees themselves. Many provider agencies gather information from employees at the time they leave the organization, either through exit interviews or questionnaires. Clearly, understanding those factors that create dissatisfaction is helpful in addressing those factors. WCDD and the Bureau, however, wished also to gather information about resiliency: those aspects of direct support providers' work and their jobs which were positive and which contributed to their willingness and desire to continue to do direct service work.

Thus, the WCDD and the Bureau retained Melissa Mulliken Consulting and Sally Mather Associates<sup>3</sup> to assist in developing, administering and analyzing a statewide survey of direct service workers regarding job satisfaction.

## Methodology

This research was complicated by the fact that no comprehensive data base exists of the names of those providing direct support services to Wisconsin citizens with developmental disabilities. After determining that it was outside the scope of the project's budget and timeline to compile such a complete database, WCDD and the Bureau obtained permission to use a list of mailing addresses of people with developmental disabilities whose support services are funded by one of the Community Integration Program Medicaid waivers, CIP 1A or CIP 1B.

To comply with CIP participants' rights to privacy and confidentiality, the list supplied to the survey consultants was modified by eliminating the names of the CIP participants but retaining the addresses. The survey was then mailed to "direct service worker at" the CIP participant's address. The survey sample targeted direct service workers working in a variety of residential settings and included every county. The envelope, cover letter, and survey questionnaire were directed to the attention of direct service workers. The names of CIP participants were not shared with anyone involved in conducting the survey.



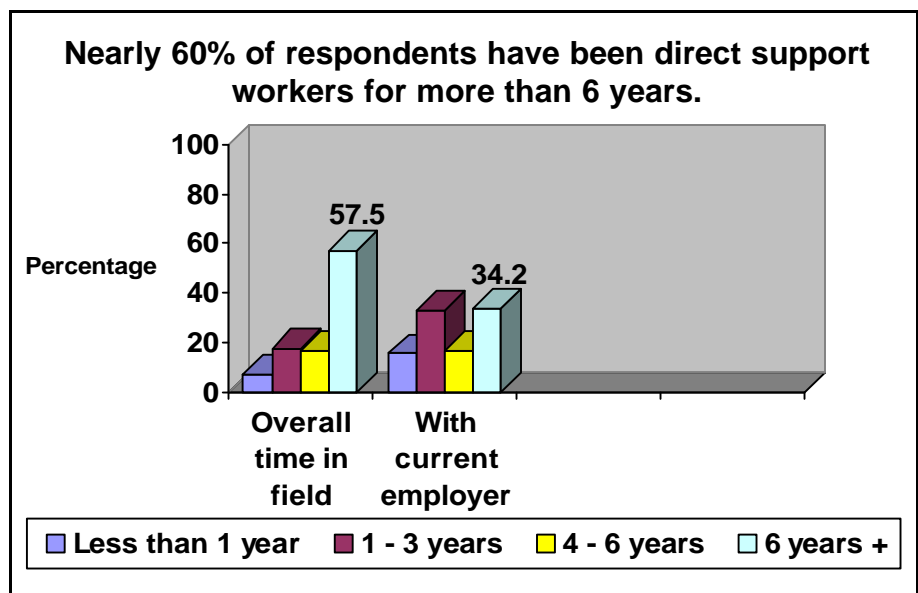
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<sup>3</sup> The principals involved in the project have 100 years of combined experience in survey research, public affairs, public policy, program development, and direct service administration. In addition to Melissa Mulliken and Sally Mather, technical assistance for the survey was provided by Dawn Wood of Wood Communications Group.

In May of 2002, a 19-question survey instrument <sup>4</sup> was mailed to that list of 4000 direct support workers in three non-institutional residential settings, statewide: adult family homes, group homes, and supported living arrangements. One questionnaire was mailed to each address. Because this project was publicly funded, no incentive (i.e. a dollar bill or small token) was included with the questionnaire. There was no follow-up reminder mailing. A self-addressed, business reply envelope was provided and 712 individuals responded by mailing a completed questionnaire within a five week timeframe.

The constraints mentioned above clearly dampened the response rate. <sup>5</sup> The respondents are most likely representative of workers who are satisfied with their jobs and who intend to remain in the field. Absent a financial incentive, which provides some motivation for unhappy workers to participate, this survey clearly attracted, overwhelmingly, the cooperation of people who have vested deeply in their jobs, have worked in the field for some time and who find the work rewarding and personally satisfying.

In short, this research provides a great deal of valuable and credible information about people for whom direct service work is a rewarding profession and who stay in the field for a long time. These are the individuals whose work histories are positive examples of employee retention, and through this research we know more now about their values, their priorities and their motivations as well as having demographic information as to their profile. The results should be a valuable tool for employers as well as for organizations, agencies and governmental entities who seek to improve employee retention - and continuity of care - among the State's direct support workforce.



## Demographics

The vast majority of respondents (85%) were women. The median age was 43. In the most recent US census the median age for all Wisconsin residents is 36. <sup>6</sup> One third of respondents have a high school diploma or less; about 16% are four-year college graduates; nearly 40% have completed some college or technical school; about 9% are technical school graduates and 3% have done post-graduate work.

<sup>4</sup> A copy of the survey instrument is attached to this report.

<sup>5</sup> Without an individual's name on the outside envelope, it is likely that many questionnaires did not reach the intended recipient. It is also hard to determine how many questionnaires, total, got into the hands of the direct support provider. Limited budget precluded a reminder/follow-up mailing and no incentive (which can increase response rate by 12-15%) was included with the questionnaire.

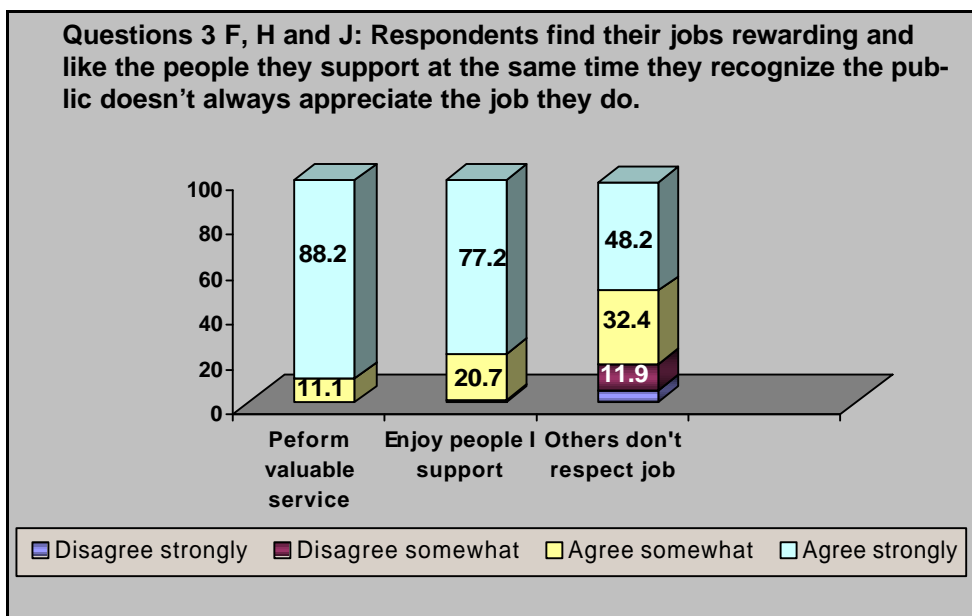
<sup>6</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 for Wisconsin

These numbers are comparable to the latest census measures of educational attainment for Wisconsin citizens as a whole. Educational level does not appear to affect these respondents' attitudes or job satisfaction.

## Findings

The WCDD/Bureau research tapped into a core of individuals who have vested deeply in their jobs, have worked in the field for some time and who find the work rewarding and personally satisfying. The research provides insights into the motivation, values and priorities of these individuals and why they stay with the work as long as they do, despite the shortcomings they acknowledge such as low pay and low social status.

In fact, these individuals find their work meaningful and satisfying to an extraordinary degree. An overwhelming 95% say they are satisfied in their job and more than half (54%) say they are very satisfied. They do not feel overwhelmed by workload nor do they find working conditions unpleasant. Only 29% think they are asked to work too much overtime and nearly 60% disagree with the statement "I could do a better job if I had fewer people to care for."



### ***Vested and Experienced***

They are also extraordinarily vested and very experienced. Asked, "Is this the kind of job you would like to continue to do for the next two years?" 83% said yes. As a comparison, in the 1999 U. S. National Employee Relationship Benchmark Report, only 24% of respondents intended to stay in their current job for more than two years.

As for experience, 57% have worked as a direct service provider for more than six years. More than half (51%) of respondents in the WCDD/Bureau research have been with their current employer four years or more and 34% have been with their employer six years or more. Only 50 respondents (7.0%) had been a direct support provider for less than one year. For slightly more than 60% of the respondents, this is not their first job as a direct support provider.

The respondents find very little to complain about. They are very satisfied or satisfied with the support

they receive from their supervisor (73%); the support they receive from their co-workers (73%); their on-going training (73%); and the orientation they received (72%). Slightly less than half (47%) feel “frustrated that I have little opportunity to advance in my work.”

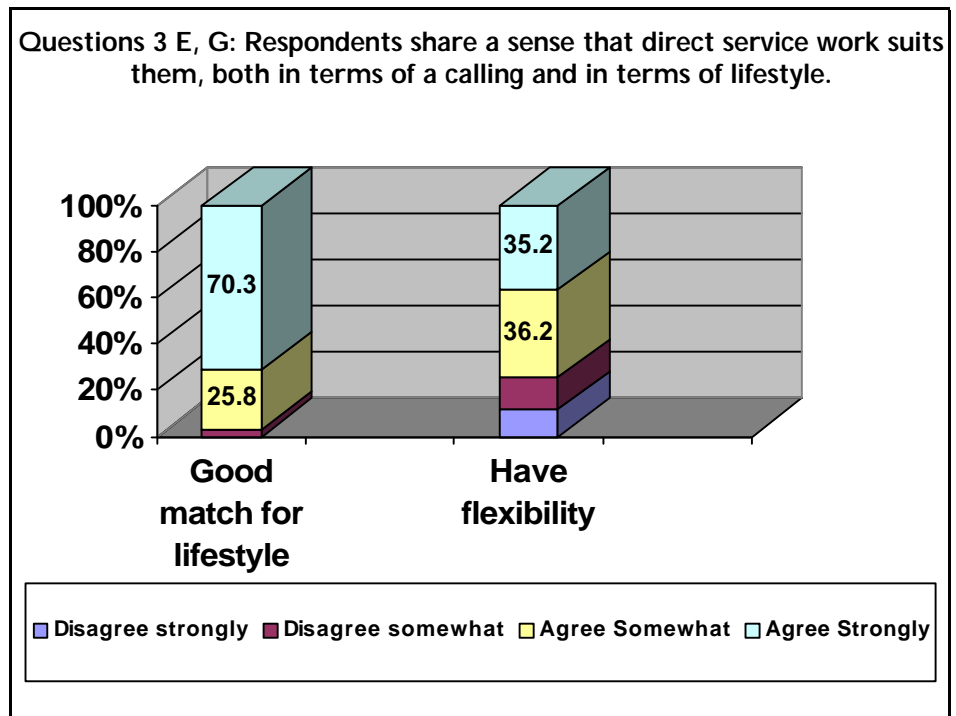
This is also a group that is eager for “more:” more chances to be involved in decision making (89%); more information about the people they care for (85%); more on-the-job training to learn new skills and solve problems (81%); and more opportunities to attend work-related workshops (79%).

When asked “If you could change one thing - other than your salary - that would make you happier in your job, what would it be?” respondents tended to focus on very specific, client-related items: a bigger van with which to transport clients; getting more information about clients so they could support them more effectively; more opportunities to take their clients out. Many also cited the need for more respite time and better communications among staff as things that they would change. It is interesting to note that practically none addressed the

“bigger” picture items that many initiatives have focused on: the low-status of their jobs or lack of a career ladder for example. It is clear that for these respondents the important improvements are those that directly affect the most important part of their job, as they see it: the people they support.

Direct support work suits these respondents, both in terms of the higher purpose it serves and in terms of the hours, demands and pace. Seven in ten agree strongly with the statement “This job is a good match for my skills, personality and lifestyle.” Respondents overwhelmingly value the flexibility their work affords them: nearly three-fourths of respondents agree with the statement “because this isn’t a 9-5 job, I have the flexibility to do other things I enjoy.” Most (54%) enjoy working as part of a team. They also like the people they care for. Almost every respondent, 98%, said they enjoyed being with the people they support. “I enjoy my job. I’ve done this type of work for over 20 years. The people I care for are very enjoyable,” said one respondent.

Not surprisingly, 67% rate their salary fair or poor and 90% said an increase in wages would be effective in increasing their job satisfaction. About one quarter earn less than \$8 an hour (21%) and one quarter earn



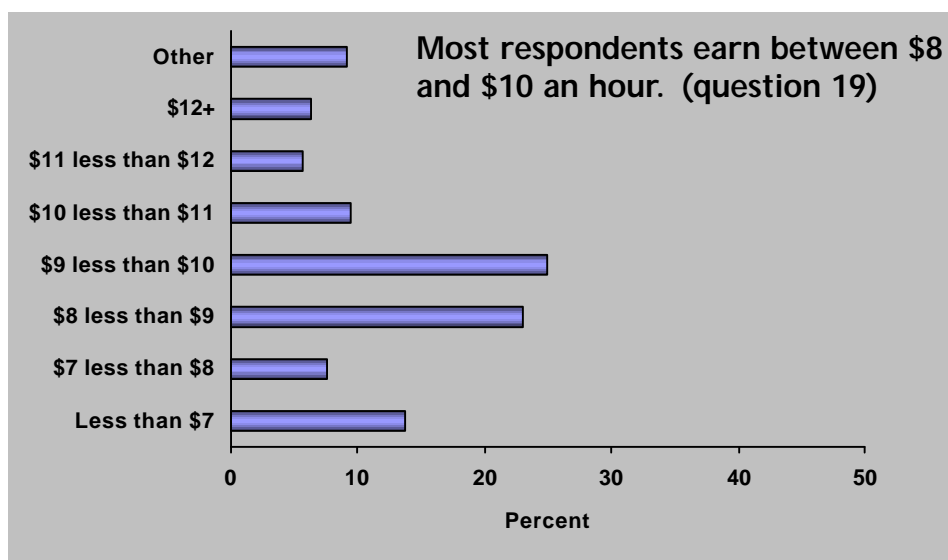
more than \$10 an hour. Most (58%) earn more than \$8 but less than \$10 an hour. Somewhat surprisingly, however, benefits were less of an issue for this group: about half get health insurance through their employer and 63% said they find their share of health insurance costs affordable. Several respondents cited lack of insurance as the one thing they would change about their job to make it better. The survey did not probe respondents household situations, i. e. whether a spouse or partner received health care through his/her employer.

But, any blips in job satisfaction are, for these respondents, clearly and unequivocally mitigated by their deep bonds with the people they support and their sense that direct support work is deeply rewarding. Said one respondent, "I enjoy this line of work. I try to keep the politics out. The individual I care for is too special."

***Respondents recognize the rewards which, for them, offset the disadvantages of the work***

There is nearly unanimous agreement that serving people with developmental disabilities is meaningful work: 99% agree with the statement "I perform a valuable and important service." There is also broad agreement among respondents that, although valuable, important and meaningful to them, their work is not respected by the general public. Eight out of ten respondents believe that the average person doesn't respect the work they do.

However, once again, the acknowledgement that the public's attitude toward their work leaves something to be desired doesn't dent their overwhelming satisfaction with their jobs. For these committed and vested support-givers it is about relationships and making a difference in another human life.



These respondents draw satisfaction from and enjoy having responsibility for another person's well being. When asked about the factors that made them want to stay in the field, respondents said things such as "I like the fact that I can make a difference in someone's life. . ." and "I feel I get back as much as I give in my job because it feels good to help someone achieve their goals. It's more like working with family members because the job is working so closely with people who really need your help." Another respondent noted, "I love working with the people I care for. I think that of all the jobs out there, this one fits me best."

## Conclusions

These direct support workers are extraordinarily satisfied with their jobs which they have worked at for a long time, and they find the work they do fulfilling, rewarding and important. They acknowledge the downsides - low pay, long hours - but those are off-set by the passion and commitment they feel toward the people they serve. For these respondents, direct support work is relational not transactional: they feel a calling toward taking responsibility for another person's care and well-being.

They hear the negative messages about the work they do - its low status, for example - but once again, their long-term relationships with the consumers they work with and their conviction that the work they do is making a difference are more important to them than those messages. Those relationships are complex and human - a fact many acknowledged - and because of that complexity, this group does not clamor for the kind of big-picture fixes such as certification programs that are often proposed to alleviate high turnover and worker shortages. Rather, their focus is on making their clients' lives better and when asked about making their jobs better, their focus is on concrete activities and items that will make a difference day-to-day.

For these workers, their jobs are good and they are doing a good job when their clients are well supported. Creating an environment in which that commitment is rewarded and encouraged is clearly a key factor for employers who wish to retain the best and most dedicated direct support workers.



# Survey Instrument