

# A Job That Matters

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Shelly Chandler (l), executive director of IACP, and Brooke Lovelace (r), executive director of Iowa DD Council, at the state capitol building.  
PHOTO BY RACHEL MUMMEY



# You're Needed

How this meaningful new career could be just what you're looking for

BY MATT JOCKS

It's not one job. It's about a half-dozen.

The income will not push anyone into the higher tax brackets.

Yet, the job of Direct Support Professional carries with it a benefit that most jobs do not—the chance to directly, tangibly change lives, face-to-face, on a daily basis.

Direct Support Professionals assist people with disabilities in a variety of ways. It can be basic care like feeding and bathing; it can be transportation and shopping or help with getting and holding a job.

"They are a teacher, a partner, a resource, an ambassador, an advocate, an encourager and a provider," says Brooke Lovelace, executive director of the Iowa Developmental Disabilities Council.

Like other areas in the country, Iowa is dealing with a labor shortfall in the profession. Agencies like the Council and the Iowa Association of Community Providers continue to advocate for more competitive wages.

The work, however, goes on, carried by individuals from a wide variety of demographics who share one quality—the desire to make a difference in people's lives.

"You do have to be the right kind of person to continue working in the industry," says Shelly Chandler, executive director of the IACP. "You're not ever going to become a millionaire.

"But providers have found that, for employees who are

willing to stick it out for a year, they tend to get pulled into the mission of that organization. They tend to stay as long as possible."

College students are a natural fit for the job, using it as a chance to help pay for their education as well as enhance it. But the appeal of providing this kind of help draws in others.

"We have a lot of young mothers—and fathers," Lovelace says. "They may be doing this while the kids are in school. We get some folks who are retired who enjoy this position. It gives them fulfillment they might not have gotten with their day-to-day tasks."

Most workers speak primarily of the personal bond that takes place. In advocating for these workers, agencies like the Iowa DD Council and IACP also emphasize the societal value these professionals provide. In many cases, it's the difference between individuals with disabilities being in a facility and being in the

workforce.

"We want to bring awareness that these jobs are valued," Lovelace says. "They do make a difference in the community.

"What DSPs are doing is actually changing lives."

**"We want to bring awareness that these jobs are valued. ... What DSPs are doing is actually changing lives."**

**Brooke Lovelace**  
*Executive Director, Iowa Developmental Disabilities Council*

## A Big Need

The effort to develop and maintain independence for Iowans with developmental disabilities depends largely on **Direct Support Professionals**. Fighting to give those professionals wages—that align with the importance of the work—has proven difficult.

Community providers are largely dependent on Medicaid funding. In Iowa, after years of no increases, the past two years have brought increases that **fell well short of the inflation rate**, according to Shelly Chandler, executive director of the Iowa Association of Community providers.

"Unlike McDonald's, where they can increase the price of French fries when they raise wages, **providers don't have the ability to do that**," Chandler says.

The result has been shortages across the board, in all service jobs, in rural and urban areas. **In Iowa, 96% of providers have job openings, and there is a 40% turnover.**

Developing strategies to deal with shortages include an **increased reliance** on virtual monitoring of vulnerable persons.

"That can help move the needle," Chandler said. **"But it's not going to solve the problem."**



# DSPs Make the Difference

## How a Sioux City man is able to pursue his career

BY GAIL ALLYN SHORT

Alex Watters, 36, of Sioux City, Iowa, still remembers the summer night in 2004 when he and a group of friends, new high school graduates, gathered at Spirit Lake for a midnight swim.

While standing on the dock, Watters says a gust of wind blew his hat into the lake. He dove into the waters to retrieve it and broke his neck. The injury left him paralyzed from the chest down.

Though Watters now uses a wheelchair, he lives on his own with his fiancée. He is a member of the City Council of Sioux City, and works as Morningside University's director of alumni engagement.

He credits Direct Support Professionals with helping him live an active life.

"They're essential," says Watters. "I'm excited for the work I'm doing at Morningside University, and I'm proud of the opportunity I have to serve the people of Sioux City. But without home health aides and individuals willing to do this for their employment, I wouldn't be able to do that."

Watters says he requires assistance every morning to get out of bed, bathe, shampoo his hair, get dressed and into his wheelchair. By 7:30 a.m., he is out the door and on the way to his workplace.

He also has help with household chores, meal preparation and laundry.

"Then someone comes at the end of the day and is able to get me out of my chair and into bed so that I can sleep for the night," he says.

The agency that supplies Watters with DSPs, however, often struggles to recruit and retain workers.

Consequently, he says getting a DSP aide for both mornings and evenings on the same day rarely happens. So he often relies on family members, his fiancée and paid college students to fill the gap.

"The only reason that I have care at this point in time is because my family has been willing to step up and assist with that."

He says his mother quit a full-time job so she could

make the two-hour drive to his home to help when DSPs are unavailable.

Therefore the need for more reliable DSP workers is high, Watters says. In fact, people with disabilities rely on DSPs so heavily they often think of DSPs as members of their family.

"You're so appreciative of their services and their willingness to help you that you can't help but forge a bond there."

Alex Watters, here and on the cover, in front of the Sioux City city hall, where he is a council member.

PHOTO BY SHANE MONAHAN



## Five Reasons for Becoming a DSP

Working as a DSP offers several advantages. You can:

### Earn extra money

As a DSP, you can help people with disabilities get ready in the morning and prepare for bed at night while holding a full-time job during the day.

### Establish a career

You can work with several clients throughout the day assisting with household chores, meal preparation, daily living tasks and doctor's appointments as your full-time job.

### Learn valuable skills

You will develop competencies that could serve you well if you later pursue a degree in nursing, physical or occupational therapy or other medical-related fields.

### Enjoy job security

The projected job growth between 2021 and 2031 for home health and personal care aides, nursing assistants and other related fields is 20%, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

### Build relationships

Like helping people? As a DSP you bring compassion and companionship to clients and their families.

"I'm excited for the work I'm doing at Morningside University, and I'm proud of the opportunity I have to serve the people of Sioux City. But without home health aides and individuals willing to do this for their employment, I wouldn't be able to do that."

**Alex Watters**

City Councilmember of Sioux City and director of alumni engagement at Morningside University





Claire Wilke is a pre-med student and a recent graduate of University of Iowa.  
PHOTO BY SAVANNAH BLAKE

# A Win-Win

How DSP work is ideal for students' schedules and good experience for their future careers

BY ANH NGUYEN

## Is DSP Work For You?

"Each person I support has a unique personality and story," Claire Wilke says about the job. "Helping people reach their full potential and achieve their goals brings me great joy."

Direct Support Professionals play a vital role in society, helping people with disabilities participate in their community and lead self-directed lives. Characteristics that fit the job include kindness and patience, accountability, a flexible schedule and prior experience with people with disabilities.

"The best part of my job is the people," Wilke says. "The smile, the fist bump I get and the knowledge that I'm supporting a valued experience is immensely gratifying."

The National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals developed an ethical guideline for DSPs, linking them with standards of professional conduct. The **NADSP Code of Ethics** includes:

- Person-Centered Supports
- Promoting Physical and Emotional Well-Being
- Integrity and Responsibility
- Confidentiality
- Justice, Fairness and Equity
- Respect
- Relationships
- Self-Determination
- Advocacy



Not surprisingly, college towns see less of a DSP shortage than other parts of Iowa. This is in large part due to the flexible but structured work schedules that can be arranged for students around their classes, as well as the meaningful work these careers offer.

Claire Wilke, a pre-med student who graduated from the University of Iowa with her bachelor's degree in psychology, is currently a Community Trainee for the Iowa LEND Program—or Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities. LEND is a federally funded, interdisciplinary program, whose purpose is to improve the health of people with disabilities.

On school breaks and holidays, Wilke traveled to Chicago to take care of her cousin, who has epilepsy. She got a part-time job as a Direct Support Professional at The Village Community in Iowa and then made a transition from a caregiver to a supportive peer at LEND.

Direct Support Professionals or DSPs are in-home health care workers or caregivers, who help with a wide range of daily living tasks so that people with disabilities can live independently, and in many cases attend school or have a good-paying job.

"When you have DSPs available, people with disabilities have more independence and autonomy," Wilkes says.

DSPs play a vital role in America's workforce and economy. However, with the current workforce turnover and job vacancy rates, as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the industry is facing a workforce shortage. In 2017, MIT Professor Paul Osterman estimated that there will be a national shortage

of 151,000 direct care workers by 2030 and 355,000 workers by 2040, according to Protected Health Institute policy research.

"Anything that has to do with supporting independent living or community access could technically fall under my job description," Wilke says.

When asked to describe a typical day of a DSP, she says that DSPs do so many different things, and it really varies from individual to individual. "I could help them with chores around their house, cooking their meals, getting the groceries, helping them get through the grocery store without getting distracted; teaching them how to make a grocery list; how to manage money, or social emotional skills," she says.

Wilke says the challenge of the job is supporting people's autonomy and self-determination while at the same time helping them make safe and healthy choices.

"Sometimes what you value might not align with what the person wants," she says. "Depending on what their goals are, what their needs are, what the person values, what the family values, and what is in their care plan, you really have to develop a relationship with that person to learn what that is."

**"When you have DSPs available, people with disabilities have more independence and autonomy."**

**Claire Wilke, pre-med student**  
*Community Trainee for the Iowa LEND Program*

Elizabeth "Beth" Yoerger (l) pictured here with her husband, works as a DSP and is also able to care for their son.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF BETH YOERGER

# Caring Hearts, Need Apply



How working with people with disabilities reaps rewards all around

BY MATTHEW CRAGGS

For parents seeking a work/life balance—or anyone with a caring heart—a career of helping people with disabilities can be quite rewarding. Not only do Direct Support Professionals enjoy flexible hours, they bring joy to their clients' lives while strengthening everyone's community.

Prior to becoming a DSP, Elizabeth "Beth" Yoerger worked as a social worker in a nursing home, but the northern Iowa resident needed a more flexible schedule to care for her son—who has severe attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

To mirror her son's schedule, Yoerger began work at his school as a paraprofessional. It was here, working with a child with Down syndrome, that Veridian Fiscal Solutions approached Yoerger to take on that child as a client and continue the work outside the classroom.

"I would go to their house," Yoerger says, "and do work with him. Put away dishes for mom, make the bed, and work with numbers and some of the things they're doing with him in school."

Often called Supportive Community Living, this aspect of a Direct Support Professional's role largely centers on bolstering life skills, such as personal hygiene, finances and social skills. Conversely, Yoerger's work also entails respite care, which focuses less on goals and more on spending time with the client.

From going to a park or county fair to simply being outside and picking wildflowers, respite care is not about what Yoerger

and her clients do—it's that they're doing it together, out in their community.

Yoerger says she loves the time she spends with her clients but also knows there's a benefit for the parents.

"You give the parents a little break," Yoerger says, "knowing their loved one is in good hands. Someone they can trust."

For Yoerger, the job has its own perks—such as part- or full-time flexibility and being able to bring her son along when she's with clients. Though the satisfaction she enjoys the most is her clients'.

"To get them to smile," Yoerger says, "when they can feel like they're making a difference, doing something like folding a towel or stuffing an envelope, seeing the reward of getting it done."

Admittedly, Yoerger says the job takes a lot of patience but insists the most important qualifications for

a DSP is their willingness to talk, listen and enjoy the time they spend with clients.

"You just got to have a big heart," Yoerger says, "and open it up to help the child."

And, there it is. Direct Support Professionals—open hearts, need apply.

**"You give the parents a little break, knowing their loved one is in good hands. Someone they can trust."**

**Elizabeth "Beth" Yoerger**  
*Parent and DSP in North Iowa*

## Iowa Resources

It can be challenging for people with disabilities to find support in rural areas, but—by knowing where to look—a tight-knit community can offer as many resources and opportunities as even the biggest city.

### Join in community events

And access resources hosted by the Iowa Developmental Disabilities Council, which advocates and works to create positive change for people with developmental disabilities.

<https://www.iowaddcouncil.org/>  
800-452-1936, [contactus@iowaddcouncil.org](mailto:contactus@iowaddcouncil.org)

### Explore existing community organizations

Such as **public schools, libraries, coffee shops, or places of worship**—for social gatherings and volunteer opportunities.

### Approach small businesses

With local owner/operators who may have more control over creating customized job training or work experience opportunities.

### At the ASK Resource Center

Find parent training and information, collaborative advocacy efforts, resources and a supportive community, as well as help finding and hiring a DSP.

<https://www.askresource.org/>



# Dream Job

How a Dedham woman finds joy as a caregiver

BY GAIL ALLYN SHORT

## Direct Support Professionals Wanted Now!

DSPs deliver support services to clients with mental, developmental and physical disabilities so they can live **active and engaged lives**.

But while DSP jobs in Iowa are plentiful, DSP workers, unfortunately, are in short supply. In fact, **96% of staffing agencies need more DSPs**, according to a recent report by the Iowa Association of Community Providers.

But you can help by launching your own career as a DSP. **No experience is necessary**. Simply contact a community provider agency in your area. Many agencies offer training and ongoing coaching to help new DSP recruits succeed.

The best way to find a provider in your area is through the **Iowa Association of Community Providers**. The IACP has a comprehensive listing on their website of providers throughout the state, as well as other resources (including open job listings) for people considering a new career.

Learn more at

<https://www.iowaproviders.org/>



**T**wenty-year old Direct Support Professional Annie Ankenbauer of Dedham, Iowa, says she enjoys talking with residents at St. Anthony Nursing Home in Carroll, and making them laugh.

Ankenbauer has autism, which, she says, makes her anxious whenever she is in unfamiliar environments. But at St. Anthony, Ankenbauer is right at home, helping her residents with their personal needs, from baths and grooming to eating and getting in and out of bed safely.

It is the kind of job Ankenbauer says she has wanted for years.

“I’ve always liked helping people,” she says.

So, while still in high school, Ankenbauer took a job in the food and nutrition department at St. Anthony Regional Hospital.

“In my first job, I was a dietetic assistant. I thought I was going to help the patients [eat]. I was incorrect, I ended up just serving the food instead.

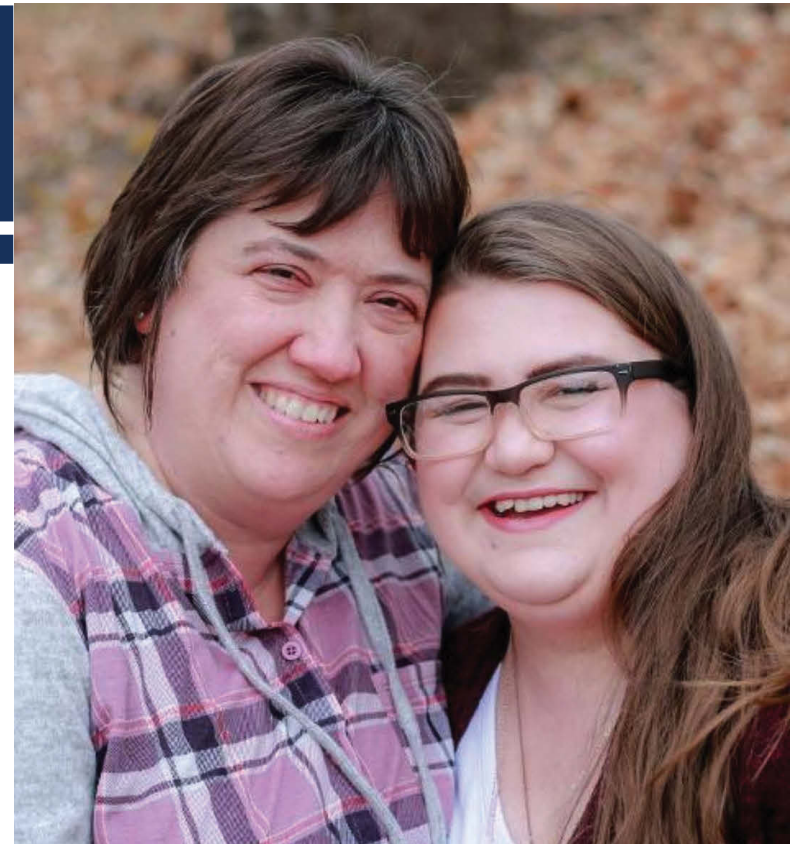
“At first I was disappointed. I wanted to do more things than what food and nutrition did,” she says.

One day, Ankenbauer’s case worker at the Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services suggested that she study to become a Direct Support Professional instead. As a DSP, she would get to work one-on-one with people.

Ankenbauer says she liked the idea. So after graduating from high school in 2021, she enrolled in Des Moines Area Community College’s certified nursing assistant training program.

For the next three months, Ankenbauer attended classes five days a week for two hours a day.

Because she struggled with autism, the school made several accommodations to help lessen her anxiety. They, for example,



Annie Ankenbauer (l) and her mother, Connie Ankenbauer, both believe Annie’s job is a perfect fit.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ANKENBAUERS

allowed her to study and practice hands-on procedures in quiet rooms away from other students and to take tests in rooms she was familiar with, her mother, Connie Ankenbauer says.

After completing the program, Ankenbauer took the

certified nursing assistant exam in November 2021. She failed to pass the test the first time, but Ankenbauer persevered, and, after taking the exam a second time two months later, she passed.

Meanwhile, a job coach with Vocational Rehabilitation Services helped her with job search and interviewing skills, Connie Ankenbauer says. And, when she got the job at St. Anthony Nursing Home, her

job coach came with her during her first week on the job to help her learn the ropes.

Today, Ankenbauer says she loves working with her residents and works hard to make them smile.

“Because when people can’t take care of themselves, that’s when I step in,” she says. “That’s when I start to help.”

“Because when people can’t take care of themselves, that’s when I step in. That’s when I start to help.”

Annie Ankenbauer  
Direct Support Professional, St. Anthony Nursing Home

# Not Just a Job

How an Iowa City man found a meaningful profession

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

**M**orris Misango, an immigrant from Kenya, was flipping hamburgers in an Iowa City fast-food restaurant when he was directed to a new career.

A cousin urged him to apply for a job at Systems Unlimited Inc., a nonprofit that provides around-the-clock care for Iowans with disabilities and other specific needs.

“My cousin worked for Systems Unlimited at the time,” Misango, 43, says. “He said it was a better job than being a cook, and he asked me to give it a try.”

Misango did seek employment at the agency, which soon hired him as a part-time DSP, or Direct Support Professional, in 2002.

Twenty one years later, Misango remains with Systems Unlimited—a dedicated partner of the Iowa Developmental Disability Council—now as a full-time Supported Living Supervisor.

Believing in “changing lives, one at a time,” Systems Unlimited was founded in 1971. Its clients reside in more than 100 assisted living/group homes in Iowa City and other communities, under the supervision of caregivers who alternate between day and night shifts.

Since joining Systems, Misango has worked at the same group home, a duplex in Iowa City a few miles from the entity’s headquarters. He supervises eight employees, some of them full-time DSP’s, others part-time.

Their goal: to help clients achieve the best lives, without being institutionalized.

“Mostly we help people with high medical needs, as well as senior citizens,” Misango says. “We help them with daily living. We help them with showering, brushing their teeth. We do their laundry. We wash their dishes. We take them grocery shopping” or, in some cases, to school or jobs.

Over time, employees and clients bond “like family,” according to Misango, who finds his work highly fulfilling.

As an African-American, he also feels a special connection with fellow workers.

“Systems Unlimited is very welcoming,” he says. “Almost 50% of its (nearly 1,000) employees are people of color. It’s a vast working environment, very accommodating.”

Like all immigrants, Misango faced adjustments.

Upon completing his 8,000 mile flight from tropical Kenya

to Iowa, for instance, he was greeted by sub-zero temperatures and a snowstorm that winter day in 1996. “That was the first time I saw snow,” he says.

Now a naturalized U.S. citizen, Misango holds an A.A. in Biology from Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids. He pursued a B.A. at the University of Iowa, completing all but roughly two of the required semesters; he plans to re-enroll soon.

His advice for people thinking of becoming a DSP? “Go for it,” Misango says. “It’s a fine job.”

“My cousin worked for Systems Unlimited at the time. He said it was a better job than being a cook, and he asked me to give it a try.”

**Morris Misango, Supported Living Supervisor**  
Systems Unlimited Inc.



Morris Misango (l) has worked in an assisted living home for many years and is now a supervisor.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MORRIS MISANGO



# If you—or someone you know—is looking for a job, consider this *rewarding career*

- Meaningful, personal bonds with clients and their families
- Flexible but reliable work schedule—easy to attend your own college classes OR drop-off and pick-up your children at school
- Gain health care experience to further your career—OR use your medical background in a new way now that you're retired
- Varied work duties, from helping someone with daily living tasks to taking them shopping or assisting them in their paid employment
- Immediate openings in all parts of the state

To learn more, contact the Iowa Association of Community Providers at  
<https://www.iowaproviders.org/> or 515-270-9495



PHOTO COURTESY OF IACP

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