



Protect Our Workforce:

How do we ensure there is a quality workforce available to provide care?

February 25, 2026

Summary:

Workforce Shortage:

Washington faces a critical shortage of professionals with the experience and training necessary to support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD).

This shortage impacts every touchpoint of the I/DD support system, including:

Behavioral health, childcare, education, respite, Early Supports for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT), local community programs, mental health, and direct care workers.

In the US today's estimated [5 million direct care workers](#)— more than double the 2000 total — are expected to grow by nearly 1 million by 2032, but that still leaves a large gap compared with the nearly 9 million jobs projected to be needed as the population ages.

In 2024, in Washington approximately [39% of direct support professionals](#) had been in their roles for one year or less, with a weighted mean turnover ratio of **37.1%**.

To prevent crises, Washington must **invest in training, recruitment, and retention strategies** that build a strong, well-compensated workforce capable of supporting individuals with I/DD in their communities.

[Immigrants make up 28% of the overall direct care workforce for long-term care services](#). As of 2023, there were over 823,000 immigrants working as direct care workers providing long-term care in the U.S. (including over 500,000 naturalized citizens and over 300,000 noncitizen immigrants). Were it not for immigrants willing to undertake this work, the crisis would be far worse.

[The factors contributing shortages](#) include low wages, limited benefits, and a lack of career pathways, which makes it difficult to attract and retain workers.

The Impact of Workforce Shortages

Without a sufficient workforce, individuals with I/DD face significant challenges in accessing the care they need. A lack of trained providers can lead to crises, forcing individuals into emergency rooms, jails, or other inappropriate settings—resulting in higher costs and inadequate care.

What is Needed

Competitive Medicaid Rates: Individuals with I/DD frequently rely on Medicaid for their services. We need to ensure that Medicaid rates are adequate to keep networks robust, make sure that providers have regular cost-of-living increases, and that we don't have service provider deserts.

A Strong Specialized Workforce: We need a plan to invest in an adequate network of well-paid providers and therapists who are specifically trained to work with individuals with I/DD, especially those with challenging support requirements and rates that reflect the needs of individuals with higher support needs.

Expand Access to Experienced Providers: It is essential to develop and provide access to experienced providers who understand and can properly treat individuals with I/DD, especially those who have dual diagnoses. We need to ensure that providers' training and experience are adequately compensated. We need to strengthen education and workforce development programs to create a **pipeline of qualified professionals**.

The Path Forward

Addressing Washington's workforce crisis requires **proactive investment** in training, wages, and workforce development. By strengthening provider networks and ensuring competitive compensation, we can build a system that delivers **quality, consistent care**—allowing individuals with I/DD to live and thrive in their communities.

What to Watch for This Session

We know that this legislative session is challenging. We need to **protect provider rates** to ensure we have a robust workforce to meet the needs of the I/DD community.