



**Penn-Mar**  
**Human Services**  
*Transforming Life Into Living*

# THE MICHAEL JAMES PITTS ENDOWMENT

*for the Advancement of Direct Support Professionals*






## MEET MICHAEL PITTS

When Michael Pitts was only four months old he developed a severe seizure disorder and a benign tumor on his brain. His family endured many heartbreaking emergency room visits with their son and over time he was diagnosed with a profound intellectual disability.

Michael has been living in a medical group home at Penn-Mar since 2009. Medically fragile, he functions at the level of a two year old, is non-verbal, walks with an unsteady gait and requires a feeding tube. But all his emotional and physical needs are well provided for by his Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) who consider him a brother, a part of their extended family.

Over the years Michael's parents have developed a deep trust in the Penn-Mar staff who have learned to search for and understand their son's unspoken words. His father likes to say he communicates with his eyes, staring intently to get one's attention, smiling softly to show that he is happy.



*“Direct Support Professionals have been an integral part of Michael’s life for over 30 years,” said his father Jim Pitts.*

*“These are the individuals that we have trusted to care for his needs over that time.”*



Inspired by the impact Penn-Mar's staff have had on Michael and the entire Pitts family, Kay and Jim Pitts provided a generous gift of \$1.5 million to establish **THE MICHAEL JAMES PITTS ENDOWMENT FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS**, recognizing the vital role Direct Support Professionals play in “Transforming Life into Living” for the individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) who Penn-Mar supports.



#### The Workforce Crisis

*For people with an intellectual disability, life depends on the competency and stability of the Direct Support Professional workforce.*

Without competitive wages and opportunities for professional growth and development, this workforce will never be stable. High turnover means that the critical bonds between DSPs and the individuals they support are being repeatedly and forever broken. This is heart wrenching for individuals and an unwanted and unacceptable service outcome.

In 2006, the US Department of Health and Human Services estimated an annual turnover rate of Direct Support Professionals of 50%. A study conducted by the American Network of Community Options and Resources (ANCOR) estimated a turnover rate ranging between 38.2% and 45.9% in 2009. It's important to recognize, however, some potential variables that can influence retention. History has shown that during an economic recession, job retention tends to be higher. Penn-Mar's annual turnover rate in 2016 was 35%. Penn-Mar Human Services has a goal of reducing the turnover rate to 30% by June 30, 2018 with a vision of ultimately reducing turnover to 15% or below annually in the years to come.

## *Studies have identified several factors that are associated with higher turnover rates of DSPs.*

- DSP wages
- Organizational socialization and training practices
- Length of time that a service setting has been in existence
- The characteristics of the people served in the setting
- Supervisor tenure
- Extent to which front-line supervisors are viewed as treating DSPs fairly

A comprehensive plan is in place to achieve the turnover reduction goal that includes strategies to address recruitment and onboarding; supervisor development; career pathways with credentialing, and compensation and benefits; however, traditional funding sources will never be enough to support and sustain a comprehensive program that will move the needle on retention.



The Michael James Pitts Endowment for the Advancement of Direct Support Professionals was established in 2016 to launch and sustain Career Ladders at Penn-Mar Human Services. One of the key components of the retention strategy is a career path for DSPs that allows them to receive recognition for performing important work through a national credentialing program plus provides wage enhancements that reward their professionalism. ANCOR studies have shown the direct correlation between wages and retention, and this program is part of a bigger strategy to reward and retain high quality DSPs; thereby leading to the best outcomes for the individuals supported by Penn-Mar.



### **The Complex Role of Direct Support Professionals**

*A life of purpose and meaning is what individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) deserve.*

Everyone has dreams, goals, personal preferences, interests and needs. This is true for all people – including individuals with IDD. The work of transforming life into living for the individuals Penn-Mar Human Services supports takes complex critical thinking, problem solving and advocacy skills.

*The recruitment and retention of a qualified, competent, and stable Direct Support Professional (DSP) workforce is the lynchpin for achieving these outcomes.*



### The DSPs role is complex

In addition to providing the most basic support, the DSP must:

- Enhance the ability of the person he/she supports to lead a self-determining life by providing the support and information necessary to build self-esteem, and assertiveness; and to make decisions
- Be knowledgeable about the range of effective communication strategies and skills necessary to establish a collaborative relationship with the person they support
- Understand formal and informal assessment practices to respond to the needs, desires and interests
- Be skilled in identifying and gaining access to the formal and informal supports available in the community
- Facilitate services through participatory planning techniques in a collaborative and expeditious manner
- Match specific supports and interventions to the unique needs of the individual and recognize the importance of friends, family and community relationships
- Understand the diverse challenges facing the individuals they support (e.g., human rights, legal, administrative and financial) and be able to identify and use effective advocacy strategies to overcome such challenges
- Mobilize resources necessary to assist an individual with their career and educational goals
- Knowledge of crisis prevention, intervention and resolution techniques and match such techniques to the circumstances and the individual
- Support the individual in the development of friendships and other relationships
- Provide person-centered supports
- Promote health and wellness



#### Career Ladders at Penn-Mar

*Career Ladders at Penn-Mar is a vital component of a comprehensive recruitment and retention strategy for DSPs that ultimately improves the lives of those we support.*

A key aspect of the program is the opportunity for DSPs to earn national credentials and commensurate wage enhancements. We have partnered with the National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals (NADSP) to implement the credentialing/certification part of the strategy. The program is comprised of four levels. In order, they are:

- 1 NADSP – Registered (DSP – R)
- 2 NADSP – Certified Initial (DSP – I)
- 3 NADSP – Certified Advanced (DSP – II)
- 4 NADSP – Certified Specialist (DSP – III)

There is a rigorous standard to be accepted in the program. Performance metrics, along with input from colleagues, individuals and families are taken into consideration when choosing candidates. Candidates need to apply for each of the four levels and meet certain



performance standards to be eligible for each level of the program. The entire process of certification is lengthy and requires a significant amount of hard work and dedication. A minimum of 100 hours of course work and practicums are required for each level. The objective measurement of skill demonstration will be completed by the NADSP.

Annual performance objectives for all DSPs align with the core competency areas of the credentialing program. This ensures that the core competency areas are fully embedded in to the entire organization and not just those enrolled in the program. Since the core competencies will be the basis for evaluation, those DSPs eligible to participate in the program become both informal and formal skill mentors to their peers. They are the standard bearers for the organization and raise the bar for all DSPs.

*In addition to the training and certification program, compensation is a key factor in recruitment and retention of skilled DSPs.*

Approximately one-half of all DSPs nationwide are paid wages that qualify for means-tested benefits such as food stamps and other public programs. Many DSPs are working two to three jobs to support themselves and their families. Traditional funding sources do not allow for wages that are commensurate to the demands of the job. A compensation plan tied to the credentials and to performance is a critical part of the overall strategy. The bonus for earning the credential is tied to the complexity and effort required to achieve the credential and sustainable, annual wage enhancements are tied to the credentialed DSPs achieving a “fully competent” rating on their annual performance review.

The NADSP National Credentialing Program is the only one of its kind in the United States with 250 DSPs in the country achieving their DSP-I Certification. In our first year, Penn-Mar supported 26 DSPs in the program. This is significant because other agencies who have partnered with NADSP support less than five DSPs in the program. The program is rigorous, requiring a strong commitment from the DSP and Penn-Mar leadership, and each DSP who has achieved DSP-I will be invited to pursue DSP-II and finally DSP-III. Penn-Mar is fully committed to providing the opportunity for all qualified DSPs to be part of this program now and in the future.





### **The Michael James Pitts Endowment for the Advancement of Direct Support Professionals**

The Michael James Pitts Endowment for the Advancement of Direct Support Professionals was established through the generosity of a leadership gift from the Pitts Family Foundation. Because this type of program is not funded through traditional funding sources, it is vital that we build this endowment to \$10,000,000 by 2027 so that we can grow and sustain this initiative in perpetuity.

The Endowment will give us the resources to grow and sustain this program so that every qualified DSP has an opportunity to earn the NADSP credentials and commensurate salary they deserve.

### *Broadly speaking we intend to do this by:*

- Enrolling up to 30 DSPs in DSP-I each year
- Enrolling DSP-I graduates in DSP-II (beginning FY18)
- Enrolling DSP-II graduates in DSP-III (beginning FY19)
- Providing wage enhancements commensurate with each level of credentialing and annual bonuses based on job performance

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Penn-Mar is committed to being at the forefront of leading the charge to address the DSP workforce crisis. Self-advocates and family advocates have fought hard for decades to ensure that supports provided are person-centered, increase inclusion, and lead to valued lives for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. If this crisis is not acted upon, the entire disability service system is at risk of turning back the clock on decades of advocacy and disregarding the voice of people with disabilities.

*We invite you to invest in a bright future for people with IDD.  
For more detailed information on this program, the budget  
and ways to give, call or email:*

**Kathy Rogers**  
**[kathyrogers@penn-mar.org](mailto:kathyrogers@penn-mar.org)**  
**410.343.1069 x 227**





## *We Need Your Support to Lead the Charge*

As you consider your goals for the future, there are any ways you can help us address the DSP workforce crisis. Your support to The Michael James Pitts Endowment for the Advancement of Direct Support Professionals will help us grow and sustain this initiative in perpetuity.

### **GIVING OPPORTUNITIES**

#### **Planned Gifts**

A planned gift in your estate can further the work of the DSP initiative, while benefitting you. You may realize tax savings or increased income in your retirement.

#### **Cash, Securities or Foundation Gifts**

These may be one-time, annual or monthly recurring gifts depending on your financial goals.

*For more detailed information on this program, the budget and ways to give, call or email:*

**Kathy Rogers**  
[kathyrogers@penn-mar.org](mailto:kathyrogers@penn-mar.org)  
410.343.1069 x 227

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**ROSANNA DISEBASTIANO | Work for the Soul**

*DSP Rosanna DiSebastiano loves people.*

When she discovered Penn-Mar two years ago this October, she thought she found her “soul work” a job that was going to touch her heart every day... and it has.

Even on challenging days there is at least one member of her Community Learning Services group who will, as she said, “reflect such a light of compassion that it creates a shift from my mind to my heart, turning my whole day around.” Although one part remains cast in shadow – the difficult struggle to make ends meet and how to strike a balance between the work and people she adores and being able to support herself financially.

It was through an old middle-school friend and former Penn-Mar Community Learning Instructor, Tina Montavlo, that Rosanna, a licensed hairstylist and self-described humanitarian, was first introduced to Penn-Mar. She had been in her fourth year of volunteering at Whispering Rise Farm and Animal Sanctuary in Freeland, Md., when Tina stopped by with a few women from Penn-Mar. One of the women was terrified of the pigs at the sanctuary, and Rosanna stepped in to console her, listening to her fears, and explaining that while being scared is normal, not all pigs are the same. Rosanna’s own experiences with fear, and early experience as a paraeducator helped inform her response to the woman, who eventually reached out to pet the pig.

“By the time the group was ready to leave, the woman’s terror of the pigs was replaced by such immense love,” said Rosanna. “The experience and transformation was so powerful that I asked Tina where I could sign up.”

Leaving her job at an organic hair salon, she turned to Penn-Mar full-time, becoming a DSP and Community Learning Instructor within a year. Today, she works with Chris, Tom, Mary and Melanie and oversees Penn-Mar’s Garden Project “Seeding Transformation,” a multipronged horticultural initiative that was launched this past spring and aims to advance disability inclusion and promote the overall health and wellness of Penn-Mar’s individuals.

Most days, Rosanna and her CLS group can be found out in the community, volunteering with Our Daily Bread in Baltimore, Meals on Wheels, visiting local organic farms, gardening and pursuing educational and recreational activities. She strongly encourages their independence, growth and communication, and is awe-inspired at how genuinely kind and good they are towards each other, something she makes a point of telling them since they may not realize people are not always like that.

*“The experience has been a reflection – they inspire me and I inspire them. We’re here to be there for each other, and encourage each other to reach our fullest potential.”*

In understanding the importance of inclusion and relationships, Rosanna finds it difficult to understand why DSP’s are not fairly compensated for the value of what they are doing. In addition to the demands of her full-time job at Penn-Mar, she is holding down two other jobs – as a mobile hairstylist and native wildflower caretaker in order to get by. One thing she fears is burn out. “I see a lot of people in my field who are burnt out and simply because they are trying to pay their bills. The struggle is very real, and it’s not fair.”

The national low-wage predicament for DSPs across the industry has led to a high turnover crisis. It is estimated that 56 percent of DSPs leave their employment within a year, and roughly 35 percent do so within six months per national data. Government funding limitations impact the amount agencies like Penn-Mar can pay DSPs. To mitigate this, Penn-Mar has embarked on a Career Ladder credentialing program to reward the important work of DSPs and provide wage enhancements. This is one of several initiatives, in addition to advocacy, that Penn-Mar put in place to address this workforce crisis.

#### **Does Rosanna see a career at Penn-Mar in the long run?**

“I don’t know,” she said. “What I do know is being a DSP has opened my heart in a way I didn’t know existed and that fulfills me. I want to be fulfilled in my work and my life, so it’s hard to see the long run, when such frustration exists in the monetary undervaluing that’s happening in the now.”



**NATALIE PLACE | Teaching Independence and Hugs**

*Once I set foot in the field, I realized that the individuals you support are the ones who make the changes, in you!*

Natalie Place has always enjoyed helping people with disabilities. At the age of 11 she babysat for a boy with muscular dystrophy and in her late teens worked with a man who was wheelchair-bound from a stroke. In between, she held more typical teenage jobs but somehow those “regular” jobs just weren’t satisfying. “I knew I had more of a purpose,” she said.

That calling brought her to Penn-Mar Human Services eight years ago as a DSP. She admits now she had no idea what she was getting into. “I wanted to help, teach, change things; it was all about me, me, me! But once I set foot in the field, I realized that the individuals you support are the ones who make the changes, in you!”

After all these years, Natalie continues to be in awe of her charges. “They bring such joy,” she exclaims. “They have daily challenges but from the minute they wake up — many of them with physical disabilities — they smile and are so happy to see you and greet the new day. They have taught me what a blessing it is to have them in my life.”

**Natalie is all about independence, therapeutic approaches to care...and hugs.**

She tells the story of a gentleman she cared for who had no family to support him. They communicated in sign language and she realized that what he needed most was a hug.

*“It sounds like such a small thing but I literally taught him how to hug. To this day, whenever he sees me he stands up and gives me a big hug.”*

Her therapeutic approach to care has her constantly asking her superiors, her DSPs and her individuals, “What can we do better?”

- Do people really need to stay on meds they’ve been taking since they were teenagers?
- How can we make some alone time for our individuals that is safe and enriching?
- Is someone just “acting up” or is there an underlying issue we need to address?
- How can we listen and respond to what our individuals want, not what we think they want?

Richard is a beneficiary of this innovative thinking. Natalie noticed how he was mesmerized by the sight of a lawn mower whenever the grounds crew came around his community home. Four years ago, Natalie planted the seed with her supervisors to find out if Richard could have the opportunity to mow his own yard as he had done previously at his parent’s home.

Since last month, after many at-bats and assurances that he would be well supervised, Richard is now living the dream, working outside inspecting his lawn mower and starting it up whenever he sees a patch of grass that needs some attention.

Emily Malone, Natalie’s direct program supervisor, describes her as a “creative thinker” who is open to trying new things and learning from them.

As a Residential Supervisor at the Jeffery Lane home, Natalie is a strong advocate for her DSPs as well. Recently she organized a group of 25 people, including support staff and individuals, to stand together at the Harrisburg Capitol to rally for additional funding for DSP wages.

“I have a will to learn and reach out to those around me, to be on the front lines doing everything that needs to be done,” concluded Natalie.

Daily, Emily Malone witnesses Natalie’s passion for making an impact. “She strives to give our individuals independence so they have the normality of person-centered support. To her, it’s more than a job. She’s making a difference not because she has to, but because she wants to.”

### Penn-Mar Human Services Giving Circles

DONOR BENEFITS	THE MICHAEL JAMES PITTS LIFETIME GIVING SOCIETY >\$200,000	FOUNDER'S CIRCLE >\$100,000	CHAIRMAN'S CIRCLE \$50,000 - \$99,999	LEADERSHIP CIRCLE \$25,000 - \$49,999	INVESTOR CIRCLE \$10,000 - \$24,999	HEROES \$5,000 - \$9,999	CHAMPIONS \$1,000 - \$4,999	FRIENDS < \$1,000
Invitation to Annual Endowment Briefing and Dinner with Penn-Mar Leadership and Board of Directors	●	●	●					
Signed Original Art Piece from Penn-Mar Art Program	●	●	●					
Special Recognition in Annual Black Tie Gala Program	●	●	●	●				
Inclusion on Virtual Wall of Honor	●	●	●	●				
Invitation to Inside Penn-Mar Programs Roundtable Sessions	●	●	●	●				
Story in Newsletter	● Print and Digital	● Print and Digital	● Print and Digital	● Digital	● Digital	● Digital Feature		
Special Recognition at Annual VIP Donor Event	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	
Recognition in Annual Report	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

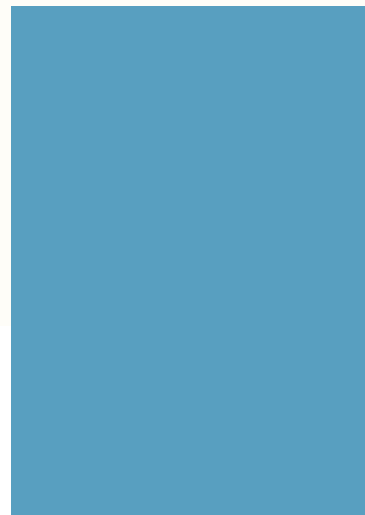


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*The mission of Penn-Mar Human Services is to transform life into living for individuals, families, our staff and volunteers. We do this by providing support services, as a team, to individuals with disabilities or human services needs in ways that promote value, independence and self-determination.*



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