



**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 community home at Penn-Mar since 2009. Because he is medically fragile, he has complex support needs. Michael communicates non-verbally, has an unsteady gait when walking, and utilizes a feeding tube. Developmentally, his brain functions on a two-year-old level. Michael's emotional and physical needs are well provided for by his Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), who consider him a part of their extended family.

Over the years Michael's parents have developed a deep trust in the Penn-Mar team members who have learned to search for and understand their son's unspoken words. His father likes to say that Michael 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 the lives of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) who Penn-Mar supports.



# UNDERSTANDING DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

*People with intellectual and developmental disabilities deserve to live lives just like anyone else's.*

Everyone has dreams, goals, personal preferences, interests, and needs. This is true for all people – including people with disabilities. The work of Living Courageously for the people 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.**



# UNDERSTANDING DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

**The DSP role is complex. In addition to providing the most basic support, a DSP must:**

- Enhance the ability of the person they support to lead their best, most independent life. This includes providing support and information, and building self-advocacy, decision-making, and other important skills.
- Be able to communicate with the person they support, whether that's verbally or otherwise. This is critical for developing a trusting, collaborative relationship.
- Be able to understand and appropriately respond to the needs, desires, and interests of the person they support.
- Be skilled in identifying and gaining access to community-based supports, whether that's supporting someone to join their local book club, navigate public transportation, or attend their preferred place of worship.
- Work collaboratively and coordinate closely with the person's support team, which can include family, friends, Penn-Mar colleagues, and other human services or medical professionals.
- Match specific supports and interventions to the unique needs of the person and recognize the importance of friends, family, and community relationships.
- Understand the diverse challenges facing the people 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 a person with their career, educational, health, or personal goals.
- Be adept in crisis prevention, intervention, and resolution techniques, and match such techniques to the circumstances and the person.
- Support the person in the development of friendships and other relationships.





# UNDERSTANDING THE DSP WORKFORCE CRISIS



*For people with an intellectual or developmental disability, living a life of their choosing is directly impacted by the competency and stability of the Direct Support Professional workforce.*

Human service organizations like Penn-Mar are primarily state and federally funded. This means that in order to provide supports that go beyond the basics, Penn-Mar must privately fundraise to close the gap.

Relying on government funding alone is not an option, as it is challenging to provide competitive DSP wages, which exacerbates the DSP workforce crisis. In fact, a study conducted by the American Network of Community Options and Resources (ANCOR) estimated a DSP turnover rate of 50%. While low wages are just one element of high turnover, they are a significant one.

Without competitive wages and opportunities for professional growth and development, the DSP 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.



## PENN-MAR'S SOLUTION

Thanks to the Pitts family's visionary generosity, and the incredible generosity of our Penn-Mar community, Penn-Mar is addressing this workforce crisis in a unique and powerful way.

In 2016, 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.

Through this endowment, Penn-Mar created a Career Ladders program. It is a vital component of our comprehensive recruitment and retention strategy for quality DSPs, and directly impacts 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. These credentials are provided through the National Alliance of Direct Support Professionals (NADSP).

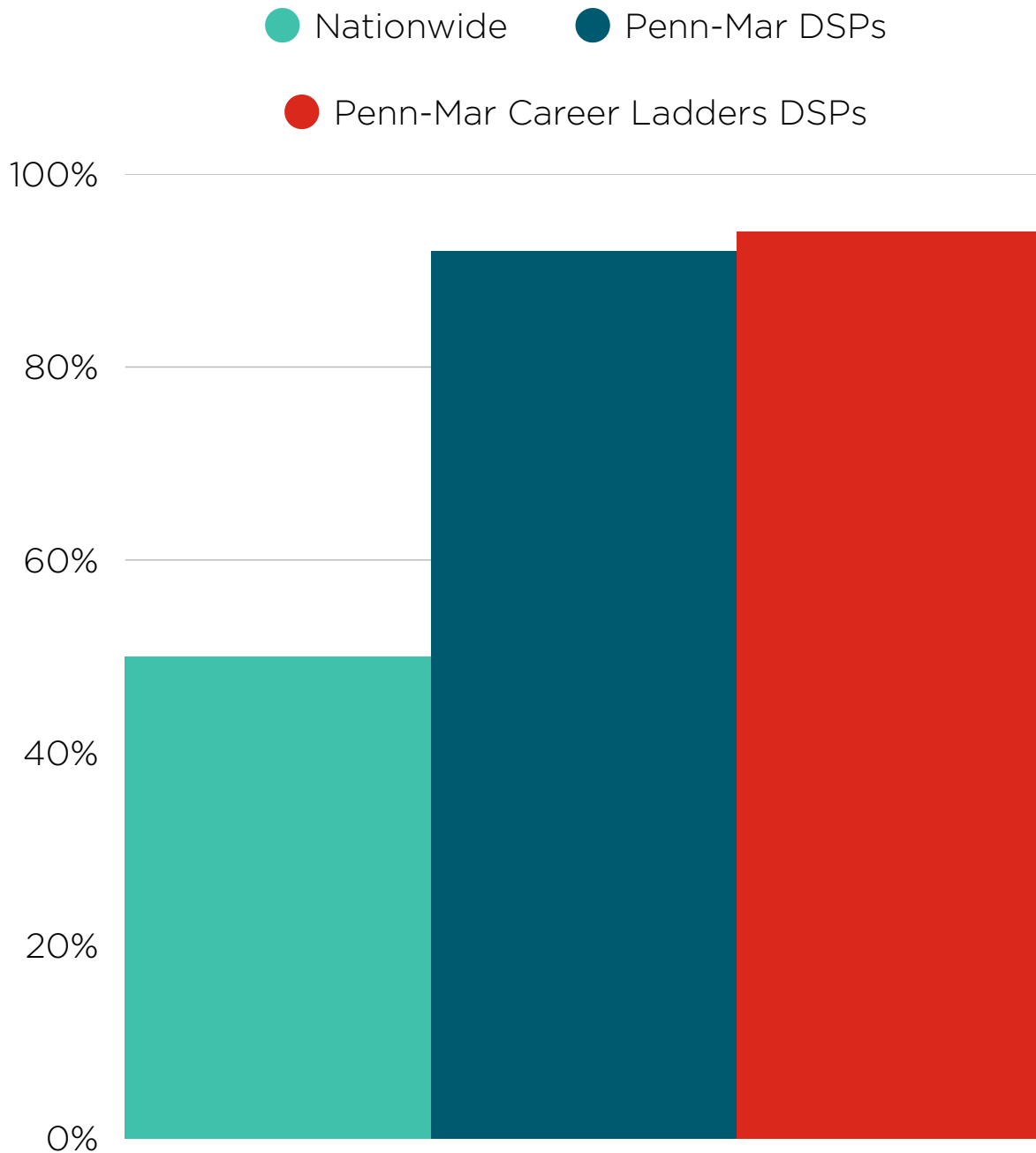
Penn-Mar was among the first in the nation to roll out a credentialing program for DSPs, and in 2017 we received a national award for our efforts.

**More importantly, Career Ladders has had a significant impact on DSP retention. In fiscal year 2024, Penn-Mar had a 94% retention of certified DSPs, versus 82% retention of non-certified DSPs.**



# CAREER LADDERS: IMPACT ON RETENTION

## Fiscal Year 2024 Comparative Retention



*In Fiscal Year 2024:*

**94% retention of certified DSPs**

*(versus 82% retention of non-certified DSPs)*

# THE CAREER LADDERS PROGRAM

There is a rigorous standard to be accepted into Career Ladders. Performance metrics, along with input from colleagues, people supported, and families are taken into consideration when choosing candidates.

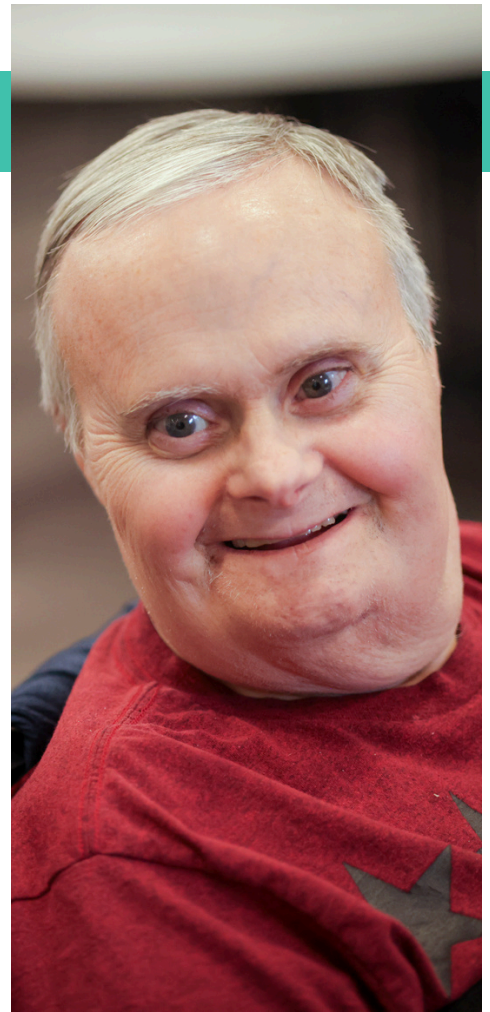
Candidates need to apply for each of the four levels and meet certain Career Ladders performance standards to be eligible for each level of the program:

- NADSP – Registered (DSP – R)**
- NADSP – Certified Initial (DSP – I)**
- NADSP – Certified Advanced (DSP – II)**
- NADSP – Certified Specialist (DSP – III)**

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, and the objective measurement of skill demonstration is 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 informal mentors to their peers. They help to set the standard for the organization and raise the bar for all DSPs at Penn-Mar.





# WHAT CAREER LADDERS PARTICIPANTS SAY

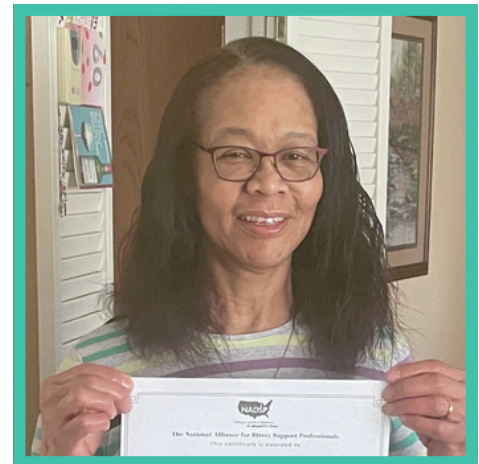


*"Career Ladders has impacted my perspective as a DSP by helping me to better identify what type of support is needed for each individual. I now know when individuals may need extra encouragement to advocate for themselves or if I need to fully advocate for them."*

-Shanice Allen, DSP-3

*"The change I've observed in my work through person-centered supports is focusing more on the individuals and not their disabilities. I have learned to be a great listener, and not just giving advice about an issue that the individuals are trying to tell me."*

-Betty Diaz-Griffith, DSP-3



*"I think my biggest take away from this is that we have no control over the path of the individuals that we support but we do have the power to advocate with them so that their lives can be as meaningful and fulfilling as possible."*

-Lisa Hartley, DSP-3



*"The individuals that we support are constantly changing, aging, growing, having different obstacles and accomplishments, but the more knowledge and understanding that I have, the more effective I will be in helping to provide the best support."*

-Lizzy Bowman, DSP-3



## RECRUITING & RETAINING DSPs

*Compensation is a key factor in recruitment and retention of skilled Direct Support Professionals.*

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.

Unfortunately, traditional funding sources do not allow for wages that are commensurate to the demands of the job. Thanks to this endowment, Penn-Mar is able to provide an annual bonus as well as an hourly wage increases for each level of Career Ladders certification. Additionally, Penn-Mar offers merit increases on an annual basis, provided that a DSP achieves a “fully competent” or higher on their yearly performance review.



*Penn-Mar has a comprehensive plan in place to reduce turnover even further, which includes:*



**Supervisor development**



**Strategies to address recruitment and onboarding**



**Career pathways with credentialing, 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.***



# WHY THE ENDOWMENT MATTERS

Because this type of program is not funded through standard government sources, we are working to grow the Michael James Pitts Endowment for the Advancement of Direct Support Professionals so that we can sustain the Career Ladders initiative in perpetuity. Our goal is for every qualified DSP to have an opportunity to earn the NADSP credentials and commensurate salary they deserve.

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, inclusive, and lead to independent 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.**



# HOW YOU CAN HELP

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

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## *Giving Opportunities*



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

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



### **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.*

For more detailed information on this program and how to support it:

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