



# COLLEGE OF DIRECT SUPPORT

# PARTNER PROFILES

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## Mississippi's Direct Support Professional Opportunity Initiative

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The Arc of Mississippi is dedicated to improving the lives of people with developmental disabilities. In fulfilling our commitment it became clear that we could make a significant impact on opportunities for people who need

support by improving opportunities for the people who provide that support. The College of Direct Support was the obvious tool to make this possible. Monies for Direct Support Professional Opportunity Initiative were requested and received from The State Council on Developmental Disabilities. Because The Arc of Mississippi is not a direct service provider, it was necessary to form partnerships with various agencies and providers throughout the state in order to reach the Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) in their various work settings and roles.

Relationships are a part of life in Mississippi. When you don't have money you still have your friends! People with common philosophies and objectives tend to know and support each other. As we learned more about the College of Direct Support, we realized the scope and breadth of impact that such a curriculum could have. We immediately brought together a group of stakeholders, all with a possible vested interest in the success of this project. We started with a question: How can we take a job like direct care worker and turn it into a profession — a Direct Support Professional? Once the stakeholder team started meeting, new possibilities we had never considered began to emerge. With some of the possibilities came barriers, but as often

as not it seemed the person we needed to talk to about overcoming the barrier was already in the room. Our stakeholders include people representing Vocational Rehabilitation in various capacities, the Department of Education from special education, regular education, and post-secondary education; the Department of Mental Health in various capacities including those managing the Medicaid Home and Community Based Services waiver; State Council on Developmental Disabilities; State Personnel Board; the state chapter of the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR); the Governor's office; all major service providers; DSPs; and families. Ongoing support was also provided by the College of Direct Support, ANCOR and the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP).

We are approaching our first anniversary of involvement with the College of Direct Support and here are some of our accomplishments —

- More than 200 learners were enrolled at the beginning of 2005 with a goal of 1,000 learners by the end of 2005 (an estimated 10% of all DSPs in Mississippi). Enrollees include DSPs working for Community Mental Health, Regional Centers, private providers, and others.
- Unlimited access to the Internet at WIN One-Stop Centers for College of Direct Support learners without computers.
- A letter of support signed and sent to each learner by the Governor of Mississippi, Haley Barbour.
- A pilot project has been developed and is underway to offer curriculum to

selected Occupational Track Diploma students in secondary educational settings and will be part of their scheduled classroom learning.

- Additional funding offered and accepted from the State Council on Developmental Disabilities to continue to support new College of Direct Support initiatives through September 2007.
- Subscriptions to *Frontline Initiative*, the newsletter of NADSP, provided to all learners.
- One Community Mental Health Center has offered the curriculum to every direct support staff member (including Children's Services, Alcohol and Drug, and others) with a 10% annual raise for staff members after completion.
- The College of Direct Support curriculum is being used to meet certain minimum standards of training required by the Department of Mental Health.
- A large number of new recruits are being referred by other DSPs who are taking or have taken the courses.
- Process has begun to embed the College of Direct Support within the State Personnel System with Direct Support Professionals becoming a new job title with benchmarks and certification.

The first year since we began working with the College of Direct Support has been marked by growth in learners and in acceptance of the potential of the curriculum to elevate the quality and status of Mississippi's direct support workforce. We feel good about where we are and even better about where we are going. Some near term goals on which we are currently working include —

- Enrolling of Personal Care Attendants, Supported Employment Counselors,

and Vocational Technical Instructors through the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation.

- Obtaining federal funding to embed the College of Direct Support in our community college system to provide additional computer access and conversion of College of Direct Support credits to college credits so that students can build on them toward a degree.
- Securing financial support from the Department of Mental Health for enrolling employees in addition to those directly involved in supporting persons with developmental disabilities.
- Enrolling of paraprofessionals in the classrooms through the Department of Education.
- Creating a state-wide organization for DSPs.
- Gaining acceptance into the voucher system of One-Stop Centers as a point of entry and as a financial resource.

...And still they come, reinforcing what we already knew; people want the tools to do their job well. We feel the College of Direct Support is one of those tools.

College of Direct Support learners are volunteers. Few have any guarantees of tangible rewards for participation (except for the staff at Warren Yazoo Mental Health). Their reasons for learning at this point are

mostly intrinsic. They learn when they can, with only a few having access to learning on the job. And still they come, reinforcing what we already knew; people want the tools to do their job well. We feel the College of Direct Support is one of those tools. We also feel responsible for finding ways to reward their initiative and the direct benefits it brings to people with disabilities in Mississippi.

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**About CDS Partner Profiles**

*CDS Partner Profiles* highlights the activities of state and local organizations that have integrated the College of Direct Support into efforts to elevate the preparation, performance, status, and compensation of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) and Frontline Supervisors (FLS). The purpose of the *CDS Partner Profiles* is to identify and describe a variety of innovative and exemplary initiatives and activities into which the CDS has been integrated. *CDS Partner Profiles* are written by leaders of organizations that are actually engaged in these efforts.

**College of Direct Support (CDS)**  
[www.collegeofdirectsupport.com](http://www.collegeofdirectsupport.com)

The CDS is an internet-delivered multimedia, competency-based training curriculum for DSPs and FLS supporting individuals with disabilities.

The CDS is available for review at: [collegeofdirectsupport.com](http://collegeofdirectsupport.com)

For more information about the CDS, contact Bill Tapp at [bill@collegeofdirectsupport.com](mailto:bill@collegeofdirectsupport.com) or Donna Kosak at [donna@collegeofdirectsupport.com](mailto:donna@collegeofdirectsupport.com) or call toll-free, 877-353-2767

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