

Leading Beyond Typical Systems: A Strategic Blueprint for DSP Well-being

By Jess Perez

- Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) often struggle to afford basic needs. Organizations should help them directly through internal programs rather than relying solely on external referrals.
- An internal “Resiliency Program” creates a one-stop hub. This creates a dignified space for food access and adds vital services like on-site health screenings through community partnerships.
- Investing in DSP health and stability saves money. Proactive support reduces turnover and sick leave, ensuring consistent, high-quality relationships for the people we support.

In the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), our mission is rightly centered on “person-centered planning” for the people we support. We build elaborate systems to ensure their choices are honored and their needs are met. However, true leadership allows us to extend that same level of person-centered thinking to the workforce that makes our mission possible.

Leading beyond typical systems starts with recognizing where our current systems are failing. For too long, the “typical system” of support for Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) has been reactive. When a staff member faces a crisis — financial or health-related — the standard response is a passive referral to an external agency. This approach represents a systemic failure; it treats the instability of a full-time professional as a personal error rather than an organizational risk.

I know this system is broken because I lived through it.

The Crisis on the Front Lines: A Leader’s Origin Story

My journey began in 2010. I found a job in a residential home and immediately realized: “I can’t believe I love coming to work.” I had found my calling. However, I soon faced a crushing contradiction: I was pouring my heart into this essential work, yet I could not afford to feed myself.

I worked two different DSP positions just to pay rent. I vividly remember the shame of relying on my landlord to bring me groceries and the humbling trips to the food bank. Later, in Supported Living Services (SLS), the struggle evolved from poverty to exhaustion as I logged 70-hour weeks to survive.

That evolution — from food insecurity to burnout — defines my leadership today. Leading beyond typical systems means acknowledging that DSP well-being is an organizational risk. When a DSP is hungry, stressed, or neglecting their physical health, the quality of care is jeopardized. Therefore, securing the basic needs of our staff is not charity — it is an operational imperative.

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Phase I: The Dignity Pilot Program

To move from passive referrals to active intervention, we are implementing a new vision at Milestones of Development. Serving our community since 1985, we now employ 155 staff members who support 85 individuals across Napa, Solano, and Sonoma counties. We are leveraging my dual perspective as a former DSP and current fundraiser to build a system based on dignity and sustainability.

Our first step is the Dignity Pilot Program. Recognizing that sending a professional staff member to a public food bank can carry a heavy stigma, we are establishing a confidential internal system focused on immediate relief.

- **The Grocery Distribution Pilot:** We are acquiring high-quality, donated food and essential goods from commercial partners.
- **Confidential Access:** The application process allows for minimal bureaucratic barriers, upholding the professional dignity of our staff.

By catching a financial stumble early, we aim to retain valuable employees and maintain continuity for the people we support.

Phase II: Strategic Expansion to the Internal Resiliency Program

Based on pilot data, our future goal is to expand into a comprehensive Internal Resiliency Program. This shifts from simple distribution to becoming a Holistic Wellness Hub.

To provide holistic support, we will forge partnerships that position the program as a central coordinator:

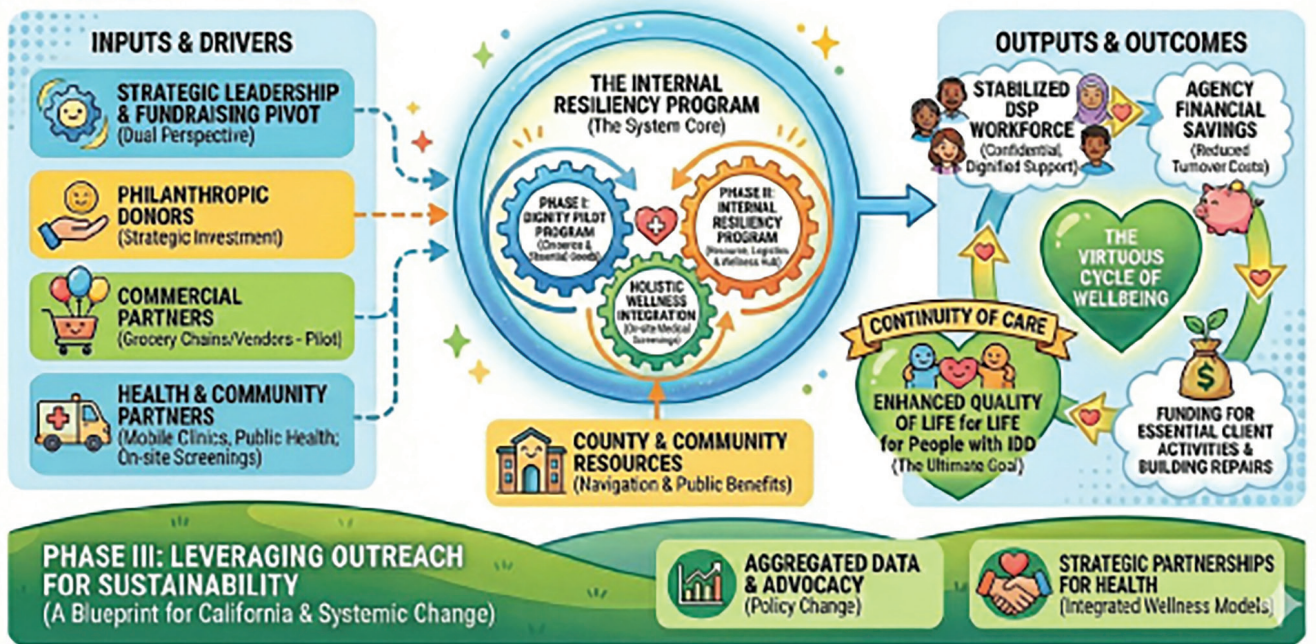
- **Field Collaboration:** We intend to open this resource to the broader professional community, allowing fellow providers to refer their own DSPs, fostering regional stability.
- **Health & Wellness Integration:** DSPs often neglect preventative care due to demanding schedules. We will partner with Mobile Health Units and Community Clinics to offer on-site screenings (blood pressure, glucose, flu shots) during food distribution days. This removes barriers to care, ensuring our workforce is physically healthy enough to support others.

Phase III: Leveraging Outreach for Sustainability

In my current role in fundraising, I am shifting the narrative. We are disrupting the norm by pitching “DSP Stability” as a direct investment in the quality of care.

Using concrete data, we show donors that investing in our internal support system is the most efficient use of philanthropic capital. Instead of funding the high costs of recruitment and retraining, donors contribute to employee retention. Every employee retained saves the organization turnover costs that can be redirected back to funding rich, individualized experiences that align with the personal goals of the people we support.

THE STRATEGIC BLUEPRINT: A SYSTEMIC MODEL FOR DSP WELLBEING & ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE



Conclusion: A Blueprint for the Field

I went from needing the food bank to helping build the systems that ensure my colleagues don't have to. This evolution is the heart of leading beyond typical systems.

We cannot demand high-quality outcomes from staff who are struggling to meet their own basic human needs. True leadership demands that we build safety nets within our own organizations.

This is not just a local solution; it is a blueprint for the field.

If other vendors across the sector were to adopt this system of integrating food security with medical screenings, we could see a systemic improvement in the stability of the entire IDD workforce. A shared network of Internal Resiliency Programs would create economies of scale for donations and produce powerful data to advocate for legislative change. We must stop looking for external solutions to internal problems and build the systems that treat our DSPs with the same dignity they provide the people they support every single day.

Jess Perez is the Associate Director of Strategic Initiatives and Development at Milestones of Development. She holds a certificate of completion from the 2025 Fall Leadership Institute. Jess is a passionate advocate dedicated to transforming service models and finding new ways to elevate the standard of care in the IDD community. Contact Jess at jessicap@milestonesofdevelopment.org.

