

# SUMMARY REPORT

## Recognizing the Mental Health Needs of an Essential Workforce

### Perspective of Agency Leaders in Ontario Developmental Services during COVID-19

#### **Azrieli Adult Neurodevelopmental Centre**

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## What is the study about?

Azrieli Adult Neurodevelopmental Centre scientists have been examining the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of people working in the developmental services sector. [We previously reported on the mental health of Direct Support Professionals \(DSPs\) in Ontario.](#) This summary explores how agency leaders in various management positions perceived their own work experience and mental health during COVID-19.

## What did we do?

An anonymous survey was administered to agency leaders (e.g., executive directors, supervisors, human resource specialists) from across Ontario between November and December 2021 to learn more about their mental health needs. We asked survey respondents about:

- Their personal circumstances and work environments
- COVID-related stressors faced by them and by people with developmental disabilities
- Their current mental health and available mental health supports
- Efforts to seek mental health supports and barriers to doing so
- Suggestions on how to best support agency leaders moving forward

## Who did we hear from?

We heard from 260 agency leaders from across Ontario including senior leadership (41%), residential (31%) and day program (7%) supervisors, human resources (6%)

and other leaders (15%). Respondents came from Toronto (19%), Central Ontario (21%), Eastern Ontario (21%), Northern Ontario (14%) and Western Ontario (25%).

- 82% identified as women and 87% identified as white
- The majority of respondents (61%) were over the age of 45 and had worked in the field for over 20 years

## What did we learn?

Agency leaders reported that people with developmental disabilities continue to be seriously impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is similar to what DSPs reported in their survey. Respondents reported high rates of mental and physical health issues in the people they were supporting, as well as increased aggression. A subgroup of respondents reported experiencing significant distress themselves. Agency leaders also provided important information about agency staff well-being, the help they need, and barriers to seeking supports. Open-ended responses highlighted key concerns raised by agency leaders, along with helpful strategies they were using to manage their stress and tend to their mental health.

## COVID-19 exposure

By end of 2021, most agency leaders were working in settings with COVID-19 exposures:

- 72% reported agency staff who tested positive for COVID-19
- 71% reported agency clients who tested positive for COVID-19
- 42% reported agency clients hospitalized with COVID-19
- 23% reported agency clients who died from COVID-19

## Challenges experienced by people with developmental disabilities during COVID-19

Leaders reported that clients were experiencing distress:

- 61% reported increased aggression (68% as reported by DSPs)
- 82% reported increased mental health concerns (82% as reported by DSPs)
- 65% reported increased physical health concerns (49% as reported by DSPs)
- 92% of leaders reported non-COVID related client hospitalizations
- 77% of leaders reported non-COVID related client deaths

## COVID-19 specific and general stress at work

When leaders were asked about stress in their work place:

- 33% reported that they were afraid of falling ill with COVID-19
- 78% reported that they felt increased stress at work

***28% of agency leaders reported experiencing moderate to severe distress***

Many agency leaders commented on the challenging nature of their work in Developmental Services. As one respondent noted:

*“To be responsible for teams of staff and being responsible for the lives of residents we care for, it is a massive undertaking and comes with a lot of pressure. To care for the lives of others, there is no bigger challenge.”*

The combination of this field of work and constantly changing pandemic measures, resulted in many respondents reporting experiencing burnout, fatigue, and loss of morale. One leader reported:

*"If I'm honest, I find it's hard for me to get out of the slump to be able to help others. Many of us need help as staff, but work is so busy and then weeks go by and you realize you are not taking care of yourself."*

### **Strategies used by agency leaders to manage their stress**

- 82% reported maintaining social connections with families and friends
- 79% reported engaging in leisure activities and hobbies
- 67% reported practicing self-care
- 20% reported seeking mental health support

Although agency leaders recognized the importance of mental health supports, one third (35%) reported access barriers. These included:

- Having the time to seek supports (63%)
- Financial barriers (49%)
- Being uncomfortable talking about mental health (26%) and stigma (23%)

Importantly, over three quarters of agency leaders (77%) reported that they felt supported by their agency.

## Moving forward

When asked what would be most helpful to them moving forward, over half of agency leaders wrote:

- Time-off (66%)
- Extra staff coverage (61%)
- Return to normal responsibilities (55%)
- Financial compensation for increased and/or changes in workload (52%)

## What does this mean?

In our prior research we argued that it is very important that we continue to monitor and address the mental health of DSPs and at the same time provide the necessary mental health supports to the people they work with. DSPs are an invisible and forgotten workforce, which has been further exacerbated by pandemic response plans. We now know that focusing on DSP mental health, without also considering the mental health of agency leaders is problematic. Both groups have identified concerns and are in need of support. Indeed, in order to improve the health of all staff, and promote a culture of well-being in Developmental Service agencies, there is a need to recognize that some of the stress experienced is universal.

There are some specific concerns of agency leaders that are different from concerns of DSPs, but there are also many areas in which these groups overlap. To address the mental health needs of staff, CAMH together with the Provincial Network on Developmental Services launched the [Cultivating Community Wellness Initiative](#) in spring 2021. This community of practice has been developing and



sharing mental health and wellness resources to Ontario Developmental Service agencies and offering monthly educational activities to support agency staff. Most of the attention has focused on resources for DSPs. This report emphasizes the importance of support and resources for agency leaders.

While wellness supports are required, it must be recognized that work circumstances remain incredibly challenging. Interventions are needed at the client, staff, and organizational level. This brief report has focused on the perspective of agency leaders working in Ontario's developmental sector and adds to what we already knew about the DSP experience. It is also important to understand the perspectives of individuals with developmental disabilities, and their families.