

# SUMMARY REPORT

## Recognizing the Mental Health Needs of an Essential Workforce

### Perspective of Agency Leaders in Ontario Developmental Services - 2023

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

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## What is the study about?

Since 2020, Azrieli Adult Neurodevelopmental Centre scientists have been examining the [impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and well-being of people working in the developmental services sector](#). This summary report explores the perceptions of agency leaders in various management positions regarding their work experiences and mental health in 2022-2023. Acting as a companion document to our initial [2022 report](#), which highlighted the mental health needs of leaders during the pandemic, this report builds on our earlier findings and calls attention to important issues that continue to challenge this workforce.

## What did we do?

An anonymous survey was conducted with agency leaders (e.g., executive directors, supervisors, human resource specialists) from across Ontario between July and August of 2023. The survey asked respondents about the following:

- **Personal circumstances and work environments**
- **Stressors faced by both leaders and people with developmental disabilities during the pandemic**
- **Current mental health status and available supports**
- **Efforts to seek mental health supports and barriers encountered**
- **Suggestions on how to best support agency leaders moving forward**

## Who did we hear from?

We heard from 230 agency leaders from across Ontario, representing various roles including senior leadership (44%), residential (26%) and day program (4%)

supervisors, human resources (6%), clinical supervisors (4%) and other leadership positions (17%). Respondents came from different regions, including Toronto (13%), Central Ontario (29%), Eastern Ontario (22%), Northern Ontario (14%) and Western Ontario (31%). The majority identified as women (85%) and white (91%), 61% reported being between the ages of 46 and 65, and 49% indicated having over 20 years of experience in the field. These numbers and demographic profiles are similar to who we heard from in surveys completed in 2021 and in 2022.

## What did we learn?

**One of our key findings is that 23% of agency leaders reported experiencing moderate to severe distress, down from 28% in summer 2021.** Furthermore, agency leaders reported that people with developmental disabilities continue to be seriously impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, aligning with findings from our [2023 survey of Direct Support Professionals \(DSPs\)](#). Leaders reported continued high rates of mental and physical health issues in the people they support, as well as increased aggression.

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

Leaders reported that clients were experiencing distress:

- **60% reported increased aggression (71% as reported by DSPs)**
- **84% reported increased mental health concerns (83% as reported by DSPs)**
- **58% reported increased physical health concerns (77% as reported by DSPs)**

- **92% reported non-COVID related client hospitalizations (67% as reported by DSPs) and 36% reported COVID related hospitalizations (29% as reported by DSPs)**
- **80% reported non-COVID related client deaths (39% as reported by DSPs) and 9% reported COVID related deaths (13% as reported by DSPs)**

### Key concerns raised by leaders

In their survey responses, agency leaders provided important information about their well-being, the supports they need, and barriers to seeking supports. Their open-ended responses highlighted key concerns and outlined strategies used to manage their stress and tend to their mental health.

Leaders highlighted various tensions within the workplace, with staffing shortages in the sector and their cascading effects on the organization emerging as the primary concerns. Some of these effects include increased workload and responsibility to ‘fill in the gaps’, an inability to take time off, and the resultant burnout from leaders and staff being asked “to do more for so long.” Many respondents also expressed frustration at being asked to do more without corresponding financial compensation (unlike other staffing groups in the sector), contributing to feelings of burnout. Several respondents indicated that, with no end in sight to this issue, they have decided to retire.

Leaders also reported significant information fatigue due to the frequent updates of guidelines and regulations related to the COVID-19 pandemic and larger systemic reporting changes within the developmental services sector. Leaders were being asked to work within a constantly changing information and reporting

landscape, and were often responsible for developing, implementing, and monitoring adherence to these policies and regulations. This was reported to be stressful, particularly when policies and regulations within the organization conflicted with broader public health, community and/or congregate care recommended practices. Additionally, this placed organizations and leaders in extremely difficult situations, having to balance the safety of the people they supported with the often-conflicting needs of families and staff.

The final key concern raised by leaders related to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19. Many continued to express fears about the possibility of a new surge of cases, as well as concerns for their own health and well-being, and the risk of transmission to others leading into the fall of 2023. It was clear from respondents that the impact of managing staff absences due to illness and trying to find coverage remained an ongoing stressor related to their main concern regarding staff shortages. While there were mixed feelings about ongoing masking and vaccination mandates related to workplace health and safety, what remained consistent was that navigating the COVID-19 landscape continued to be a considerable stressor for leaders within developmental services agencies.

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

To manage stress and prioritize well-being, agency leaders adopted a range of strategies:

- **82% reported maintaining social connections with family and friends**
- **81% reported engaging in meaningful activities and hobbies**
- **59% reported practicing self-care**

- **51% reported practicing mindfulness and/or being present in daily activities**
- **20% reported seeking mental health support**

Although agency leaders recognized the importance of mental health supports, over one-third (37%) reported access barriers. These included:

- **Having the time to seek supports (69%)**
- **Long wait times (53%)**

Importantly, 69% of agency leaders reported that they felt supported by their agency.

## Moving forward

When asked what would be most helpful to them moving forward, a majority of agency leaders highlighted the following:

- **Financial compensation for increased and/or changed workload (71%)**
- **Time off (69%)**
- **Extra staff coverage (66%)**

## What does this mean?

In our prior research, we emphasized the pivotal role of developmental services staff and highlighted how DSPs are an invisible and forgotten workforce, further exacerbated by pandemic response plans. This report, together with our 2021 report on leaders, argues that focusing solely on DSP mental health without also

considering the mental health of agency leaders is shortsighted. Both groups are vital to the functioning of developmental services agencies and to the delivery of high quality, comprehensive care. Indeed, to improve the health of all staff and promote a culture of well-being in developmental services agencies, there is a need to recognize how pervasive stress is, regardless of role.

Furthermore, there continue to be important lessons to be learned from leaders in the sector, many of whom have over 20 years of experience in this field and have led organizations through challenging times before. Findings from the 2023 survey suggest that, despite seeing an end to the acute phase of the pandemic and related public health restrictions, the developmental services sector has not yet recovered. There has been significant loss, trauma and burnout in the sector, and high levels of difficulties observed in the population served.

Similar to DSPs, agency leaders have highlighted a number of pressing needs moving forward, with an increase in pay as the most crucial change required. It is important to note that more leaders endorsed this in the 2023 survey than in prior years. Failure to address concerns about compensation could result in ongoing recruitment and retention challenges, a greater need for training new staff in disability-specific responsibilities, and continued inconsistencies in client support, which may increase stress for people receiving support. All of these operational issues can ultimately impact the safety and overall well-being of people with developmental disabilities as well as the staff working in these settings (e.g., due to unfamiliar needs, routines, workplaces).

## Conclusion

The results from our 2023 survey of agency leaders highlights the ongoing challenging work circumstances within the developmental services sector. While it is encouraging to see a decline in the number of leaders reporting moderate to severe distress compared to our 2021 survey, it remains clear that wellness supports tailored for agency leaders, including adequate time off and accessible mental health supports, are essential. In addition, wellness interventions aimed at the client, staff, and organizational levels are crucial. Based on our findings since 2020, it appears that promoting wellness only at the individual level, in the absence of larger organizational and systemic change, is not an effective strategy to increase overall mental well-being of this workforce. To truly address the health and well-being of leaders, staff and clients, interventions must also target underlying sector-wide issues such as organizational culture, workload, and compensation.