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Disabled NJ Residents Rely On These Workers – Don't Forget Them: Op-Ed

A program officer at one of the largest nonprofits serving people with disabilities in NJ has a plea for Direct Support Professionals Week.



Eric Kiefer, Patch Staff

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NEW JERSEY — *The following op-ed comes courtesy of Easterseals NJ's Chief Program Officer Cristina Jones. Find out how to [post announcements or events](#) to your local Patch site.*

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When the COVID-19 pandemic began, a lot was brought into light. When driving, we would pass signs saying “Hero’s Work Here,” stores had posters praising essential workers, and news outlets consistently spoke on the importance of their roles. The groups of individuals in our society who carry the weight and proved to be essential were truly highlighted during this time. We saw that without our doctors, nurses, caretakers, and Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), we would not be able to keep going. Although it took a pandemic to have this revealed, we cannot forget their impact as we enter the post COVID-19 “endemic” lifestyle. Easterseals New Jersey employs many of these essential DSPs, and we have witnessed the incredible impact they have on individuals with disabilities and those who care for them. So, in honor of DSP Recognition Week (Sept. 11-17), we hope you’ll join us in celebrating their efforts by learning a bit more about the fantastic work they do.

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Well before the COVID-19 pandemic, DSP workers put in their all to help people who need it most, and they have continued to provide top-notch care well after. A DSP worker is defined as an individual who works directly with people who have intellectual and developmental (I/DD) disabilities or severe mental illness. The role of a DSP in society is significant. In Easterseals NJ programs alone, they provide vital services to the over 4,000 individuals and families we serve each year. Our DSPs play a critical role in the lives of our program participants by providing care that is geared toward one's specific needs and goals. Whether it is individual or group therapy, community outings, employment and education opportunities, or residential services, our DSPs are equipped to provide services that allow the individual to access their community and thrive. Over the years, family members and caretakers of our participants have reached out to express their gratitude for the work our DSPs offer. Program participants have been eager to share their stories of how far they've come and how much they've accomplished. One of our participants, George, went from being homeless and struggling with depression to maintaining housing and becoming a published author. He states, "With the help of Jessica, my Easterseals Case Manager, and my families support, I was able to achieve my goals and make my dreams come true." No milestone could be reached, and no goal could be achieved, without the hard work and long hours provided by our DSPs.

Enriching Lives

Easterseals NJ mission is to enrich the lives of people with disabilities and special needs, and those who care about them, by providing opportunities to live, learn, work, and play, in their communities. Without our DSPs tireless dedication, this mission is nothing more than a pipedream. Just because we are entering the “endemic” lifestyle, the work of DSPs and all essential workers remain. We cannot forget about the tremendous impact made every day by these heroes. The work of a DSP is never represented just through them, but also by the individuals they serve. Every day that a target is achieved, or a milestone is reached, it proves just how essential DSPs are. We hope that everyone remains aware of the great work provided by DSPs, not just during DSP Recognition Week, but all throughout the year.

They are still essential.

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