

Recognizing Excellence 2026

Honoring the 2026 Class of
Outstanding Direct Support Professionals

The 2026 DSP of the Year Awards are proudly underwritten by Relias.



@TheRealANCOR | ancor.org

ANCOR's National Partners Congratulate the 2026 DSP of the Year Honorees

DIAMOND PARTNERS



PLATINUM PARTNERS



GOLD PARTNERS



BRONZE PARTNERS



Thank You, Direct Support Professionals!

A Letter from ANCOR's Leadership

To all those who advocate on behalf of our direct support workforce:

We have all heard the word “unprecedented” too many times. On the ground, the people doing the day-to-day work of supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities have maintained consistent, person-centered, high-quality supports through it all.

Through the global health crisis that rocked us all, and ebbs and flows of the political landscape, and so much more, we have heard stories of loss, fear, and sadness. But we have also heard countless stories of love, resilience, and tremendous devotion.

Together with you, we have spent the past year advocating for sustained funding for community I/DD services, because we know how badly our workforce needs better support and higher wages. As we continue that fight, it is our genuine honor to acknowledge and elevate the work that you do by hosting ANCOR's annual DSP of the Year Awards.

This year, our judging panel had the impossible task of selecting the 57 professionals profiled here from the incredible stories of nearly 550 nominees.

From the grand stories, like planning and executing dream vacations or finding and reconnecting with family members, to the stories of everyday successes, such as developing routines to help someone shine at a new job or identifying a hobby that turns into a passion, the dedication of these DSPs makes the difference. Their work increases independence and helps people achieve meaningful lives.

This year's class of honorees has done it all and is truly special. We hope you'll take the time to read through each DSP's profile. As you do, keep in mind that these represent a small sampling of the drive, dedication, and devotion delivered by direct support professionals, day in and day out.

On behalf of the entire ANCOR community: THANK YOU, DSPs!

Sincerely,



Barbara Merrill
Chief Executive Officer / ANCOR



Lori Kress
President / ANCOR Board of Directors

2026 National DSP of the Year

Carly Neumuth

Cindy and Vic's R&R / Anchorage, AK



Carly approaches direct support with imagination, humor, and a deep belief in what people can achieve when their goals are taken seriously.

At Harmony House in Anchorage, Carly supports three women—Lulu, Jenny, and Roxy, collectively known as “Charlie’s Angels”—who spent years working toward the chance to live together. Carly, their “Bosley,” is always by their side as they develop everyday life skills.

Carly makes a point of understanding each person’s dreams, then actively works to make them come true in a realistic and meaningful way. Lulu wanted to have a pet cat, so Carly encouraged her to volunteer at the local Humane Society, where she is now welcomed by name in the cat room each week. When Jenny shared her interest in motorcycles, Carly pulled out her Harley Trike for a ride, which inspired Jenny to participate in local Harley events.

Inside Harmony House, Carly helps the women build strong relationships with one another and with the community around them. When all three women started dating around the same time, a little bit of drama ensued—think dinner guest debates, Valentine’s Day gift envy, and sisterly squabbles. Carly helped navigate the swirl of emotions, drawing on her past experience as an outdoor survival instructor and joking that the experience may have been more challenging than backcountry bear safety.

Among her colleagues, Carly leads by example. She participated in Alaska’s first NADSP Accredited Training Cohort, but fell ill with COVID-19 during a critical phase of the certification process. Not one to let a virus get in her way, Carly completed the entire certification while recovering. Why? “I got too bored,” Carly recalls. Later, she supported seven coworkers through the same process, offering guidance and encouragement along the way. Outside of work, she coaches track and field for Special Olympics, helping athletes build confidence, friendships, and pride in their achievements.

Through Alaska’s pilot assistive technology program, Carly uses MapHabit tools to make everyday routines more engaging. In one instance, she helped Lulu record a video of herself brushing her teeth to a Justin Bieber song, turning a dreaded task into a moment of fun.

Whether she’s organizing a new opportunity or trying a different approach, Carly doesn’t just do the work at hand—she elevates it—illustrating why she truly embodies excellence in the direct support profession.

CONGRATULATIONS CARLY NEUMUTH

ANCOR Direct Support Professional of the Year

Some people do a job. Some people change lives. Carly Neumuth does both every single day.

At Cindy and Vic's, we are incredibly proud to celebrate Carly as the ANCOR Direct Support Professional of the Year. This honor recognizes not only her excellence as a DSP, but the compassion, joy, and humanity she brings to everything she does.

Carly shows up fully on the track, in the community, and in the quiet moments that matter most. As a Special Olympics coach, she stands beside athletes with belief and encouragement, celebrating growth, effort, and every kind of victory. As a trusted supporter and champion, she helps the people she supports shine whether that means walking confidently across the stage at the Miss Amazing Pageant or stepping boldly into new experiences with pride and self-expression.



Beyond her work, Carly is exactly who she is at her core: warm, grounded, and full of love. Carly leads with compassion, supports with creativity, and inspires through action. She doesn't just meet people where they are, she believes in where they're going.

Carly, we are so proud of you.

With admiration and gratitude,
Cindy & Vic
and the entire Cindy and Vic's family



2026 Special Category Award: Advocacy

Tameka Coles

Abound Health / Harrisburg, NC

Advocacy shapes the way Tameka Coles approaches every aspect of her work. As an Alternative Family Living (AFL) DSP and as a DSP Advocate, she ensures that the voices of the people she supports and the voices of her fellow professionals are heard and respected.

Tameka recently starred in a “Day in the Life” video, in which she demonstrates how she supports people to advocate for themselves and take advantage of opportunities. The video captures her person-centered approach and has since become a tool for other AFL providers to see how person-centered supports can be both practical and transformative.

Within her agency, Tameka regularly hosts support group meetings for DSPs, creating a safe space for connection and professional growth. But her advocacy extends beyond Abound’s walls. When Medicaid funding cuts were proposed, Tameka created another video demonstrating how DSPs can contact state legislators and advocate for I/DD services—helping to demystify the advocacy process and encourage others to speak up.



2026 Special Category Award: Innovation

Braeden Tyler-Babkirk

Dungarvin / Spokane, WA



At the heart of Braeden Tyler-Babkirk's work is a commitment to making sure the voices and interests of those he supports are the number-one priority. He supports people in making decisions about their daily lives, from routines to long-term goals. When challenges arise, Braeden advocates to ensure they have fair access to opportunities in their community.

Braeden put this method into practice while supporting Jeff, who wanted more opportunities to socialize but needed help finding a setting that felt right. Knowing that Jeff likes fantasy games, Braeden found a local comic book store that hosted *Magic: The Gathering* events. There, Jeff was able to find his place in an inclusive community, where he could feel comfortable enjoying his favorite game. All the while, Braeden was around to help him navigate new social interactions.

By building support around individual strengths and interests, Braeden helps everyday experiences become opportunities for connection and progress.

2026 Special Category Award: Leadership

Kirsten Purinton

Emory Valley Center / Lenoir City, TN

Kirsten Purinton invests deeply in the success of others. When a new staff member begins supporting someone in the Workforce Development program, Kirsten is often the person they turn to first. As a job coach and mentor, she helps colleagues navigate person-centered employment supports, sharing practical strategies and encouragement long after formal training ends. Kirsten checks in regularly with her team, helping them think through challenges and celebrating progress along the way. Those steady conversations have helped create a culture of collaboration and learning across the program.

Kirsten brings that same curiosity and problem-solving to the people she supports. As a certified SHIFT Enabling Technology Innovation Specialist, she is consistently on the lookout for ways technology can expand independence at work. For instance, she introduced smartwatches that deliver quiet task reminders and visual to-do lists during independent shifts. Likewise, for a worker who is deaf, Kirsten secured Metaglasses that translate spoken communication, making everyday workplace conversations more accessible. These innovations have been essential in supporting workers with disabilities to succeed in their workplaces.



Congratulations To The

ANCOR 2026 DSP OF THE YEAR!

Kirsten embodies Emory Valley Center's five core values—**Compassion, Inclusion, Quality, Value, and Forward Thinking**—through her dedication as a Job Coach. She uses person-centered thinking to help each individual build confidence and independence, creating customized supports and implementing innovative technology solutions that promote success in the workplace.

Beyond employment supports, Kirsten fosters meaningful relationships, encourages community involvement, and mentors new staff with professionalism and heart. Her creativity, leadership, and unwavering commitment to those she supports make her truly deserving of DSP of the Year.



Kirsten Purinton



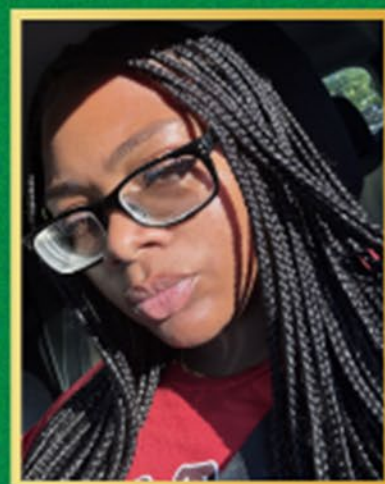
EMORY VALLEY CENTER
MAXIMIZING HUMAN ABILITIES



Braeden Tyler-Babkirk
Innovation Award - Compass, WA



Sampson Wolloh
State Winner - Kentucky



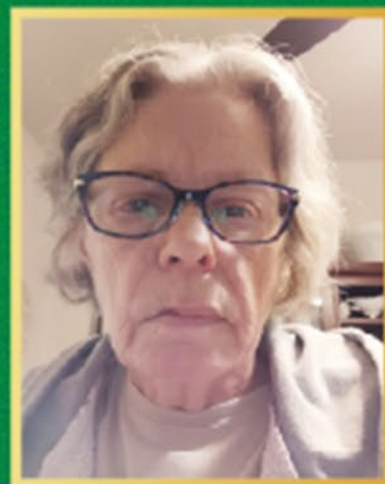
Victoria Ward
State Winner - Wisconsin



Stephen Kibii
State Winner - Indiana



Jene Morris
State Winner - Oklahoma



Brenda Olson
State Winner - Minnesota

**Congratulations to our
2026 DSP of the Year Winners!**

Thank you for making a difference in the lives of those you support with your dedication and exceptional service!



2026 Special Category Award: Person-Centered Supports

Amanda DeStefani

Penn-Mar Human Services / York, PA



After reading *Charlotte's Web*, the people Amanda DeStefani supports decided to create their own puppet show. Amanda made sure everyone had a role in bringing the production to life, supporting people to choose characters, write dialogue, and design scenery. When one man joined the project late, Amanda smoothly folded him into the process, making sure his ideas became part of the story as well.

These kinds of projects perfectly reflect the way Amanda approaches her work. She starts by listening to what the people want to do and then helps turn those ideas into real experiences. When someone suggested making ice cream sundaes, Amanda organized a shopping trip for ingredients and helped the group host their own ice cream social.

Through activities like these—and through the self-advocacy group she leads—Amanda encourages everyone she supports to share their ideas and bring them to life. By making sure their voices guide each decision, she helps them build the confidence to speak up, try new things, and take ownership of the experiences they create together.

2026 Special Category Award: Relationships

LeAnna Tillman

Easterseals Midwest / Joplin, MO

The people who participate in LeAnna Tillman’s workshop, “How to Be a Friend,” don’t just talk about inclusion—they experience it. Through sensory activities and honest conversations, people explore what friendship and belonging feel like while also teaching others about their own experiences. LeAnna has since brought this workshop to new places, such as college classes and business groups, where each session opens doors to new partnerships and conversations about inclusion.

LeAnna also understands that volunteering creates opportunities for lasting connections. Some of the people she supports started delivering food through Meals on Wheels, while others serve lunch each week at a senior center. For three years, the people LeAnna supports partnered with local volunteer networks to raise funds and deliver more than 110 backpacks filled with school supplies for children in need, along with over 100 Thanksgiving food baskets.

From planning and fundraising to shopping and distribution, these activities have helped those whom LeAnna supports become recognized members of the community while also developing life skills and lasting relationships.



2026 Alabama DSP of the Year

Crystal Holifield

Volunteers of America Southeast / Mobile, AL



Crystal Holifield understands that no two people are the same. Therefore, she makes a point to learn the routines, interests, and communication styles of each individual she supports, ensuring her care feels personal, respectful, and meaningful. When someone feels anxious or unsure, she responds with patience, clear explanations, and choices that help restore a sense of control.

She also develops inventive, practical ways to empower the people she works with, from personalized visual schedules to systems that track progress on their goals. Encouraging independence whenever possible, Crystal offers guidance only when needed and adapts activities to fit each person's abilities and interests. Her themed activities add purpose and fun to daily routines, and their success has inspired other staff to adopt her ideas.

A strong advocate, Crystal ensures the voices of those she supports help shape care plans and decisions, creating an environment where people feel heard, capable, and valued every day.

2026 Alaska DSP of the Year

Thomas Bandelow

Hope Community Services / Anchorage, AK


Those who know Tom say it best: He provides “care, dignity, and advocacy beyond expectations,” is “a rare individual who leads by example,” and “brings consistency, stability, and genuine warmth.”

For more than 28 years, Tom has provided outstanding direct support to Alaskans with intellectual and developmental disabilities, often remaining a steady presence in the lives of the same individuals for a decade or more. That continuity reinforces trust and security—but never complacency.

His commitment is especially evident in moments of transition and stress. Early in his career, Tom supported Alaska Native individuals as they moved from an institution into their own home. Recognizing that both people had experienced trauma from being removed from their birth homes, he prioritized cultural sensitivity and trust-building. Tom brings that same attentiveness today, using his calm presence and keen awareness to reduce anxiety, ensure safety, and help people feel truly at home.



Congratulations

to Alaska's  2026 DSP of the Year!



Tom Bandelow



Tom, we are thrilled to see you receive this well-deserved recognition! Your dedication to teach, coach, and mentor, and the care you bring to people who experience disabilities make a meaningful difference, and we're proud to celebrate this honor with you.



CONGRATULATIONS!

Direct Support Professionals are essential to helping people with disabilities live independently and participate in their communities. At Mosaic, our DSPs provide the personalized support necessary for people to reach their goals and live the lives they want.

We are proud to celebrate our two ANCOR Award recipients who represent the thousands of Mosaic DSPs serving in more than 825 communities across 12 states. For them, their important work is not a job—it's a calling.

Siobhan Gonzales and Ritchy Corvil, thank you for the dedication you show to that calling.



Siobhan Gonzales, *Arizona*



Ritchy Corvil, *Delaware*



MosaicInfo.org

2026 Arizona DSP of the Year

Siobhan Gonzales

Mosaic / Tucson, AZ



Siobhan's standard of care is rooted in her family history, shaped by her experience supporting her autistic brother from a young age. That early experience influenced not only her compassion, but also the thoughtful, intentional way she approaches her work today.

Siobhan provides eight hours of daily care, five days a week, to a young person with cerebral palsy, including support throughout the school day. She understands the person's gestures and encourages self-expression, helping others better understand what they're seeking to communicate.

In working with people who have significant needs, Siobhan supports not only the individual but also the entire family through her reliability and steady commitment. She prioritizes keeping people connected to their community, friends, and loved ones, expanding their worlds at home and in the community. Siobhan's impact is so strong that families see her as a caregiver, but also as a trusted extension of their own family.

2026 Arkansas DSP of the Year

Megan Eash

Network of Community Options / Batesville, AR

Megan Eash's displays her commitment to the people she supports each day. From welcoming them to attend church with her to including them in family celebrations, those who accept Megan's services are truly woven into her life.

When two people she supports wanted to participate in a statewide conference, Megan didn't just arrange transportation and lodging, she encouraged them to attend sessions, meet new people, and take advantage of new experiences. One of them walked away from that experience with friendships he might not otherwise have formed, as well as an invitation to sing at next year's conference! Back home, when one man, who is legally blind, regularly spilled coffee grounds using his traditional coffee maker, she taught him how to use a Keurig machine with pods. The ability to make his coffee without making a mess, however small it seems, meant the world to him.

Megan brings this same mindset to the way she supports her team. She mentors new DSPs, modeling how attentiveness and respect can transform support into something deeply personal and empowering.



NCO

Network of
Community
Options, Inc.

Congratulations

MEGAN EASH

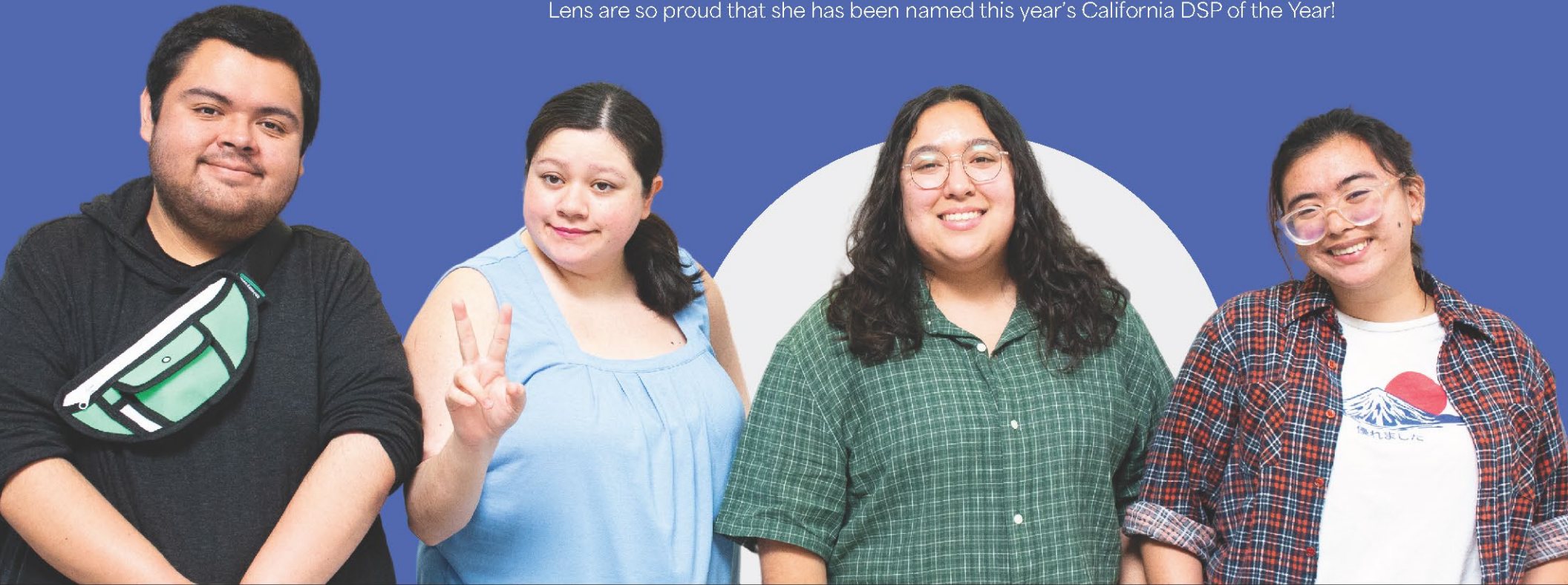
Megan is the teammate everyone deserves! Her willingness to help others and her positive attitude truly make a difference at NCO. We are thrilled to recognize you as ANCOR's DSP of the Year!



Congratulations Melanee Garls!

2026 CALIFORNIA DSP OF THE YEAR

Melanee's compassion, dedication, and commitment to personal growth inspire everyone she supports. She empowers individuals to grow, feel valued, and reach their goals, consistently going above and beyond to support their well-being and success. The impact that Melanee has on the individuals she works with is immeasurable, and we at Outside the Lens are so proud that she has been named this year's California DSP of the Year!



The Media Makers program seeks to inspire and nurture young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD)—helping them express their place and purpose in the world through social-emotional and media arts skills.



2026 California DSP of the Year

Melanee Garls

Outside the Lens / San Diego, CA



When someone feels heard, progress follows—something Melanee Garls knows well. Melanee creates a safe, supportive environment where those she works with can express themselves and be vulnerable. She then turns that trust into action by meeting one-on-one to discuss interests, goals, and next steps.

For Santi, a first-generation college student, that has meant guidance through scholarship applications and financial aid forms, along with coaching on deadlines and academic expectations. With Gio, long conversations about his mental health and love of comedy led Melanee to support him to produce public service announcements about bullying in which he used humor and honesty to process his experiences and encourage others. And when Joseph developed a passion for architectural photography, Melanee worked with educators to shape projects around that interest, helping him build a portfolio.

Melanee's leadership extends to designing adaptive solutions so the people she supports can be creative. With this, creative expression becomes a powerful tool for promoting self-sufficiency and motivation.

2026 Colorado DSP of the Year

Amanda McConnell

Developmental Disabilities Resources Center / Lakewood, CO

Amanda McConnell sees employment as more than a job placement for those she supports—it's a path toward long-term independence. Grounded in person-centered thinking, she helps people untangle challenges and discover where their strengths truly fit.

When one of the men Amanda coaches struggled with anxiety in conversations with their manager, Amanda didn't try to fix the situation. Instead, they explored workplace dynamics together and reframed difficult interactions, giving him tools to navigate relationships on his own. In another instance, Amanda guided a woman who had lost two early childhood education jobs through honest reflection about her interests and work style. In both situations, Amanda demonstrated respect for personal autonomy, patience, empathy, and thoughtful reflection to support insight and direction.

Her knowledge has earned broader recognition, too, including an invitation from Hilton leadership to present on competitive integrated employment at a national conference.



2026 Connecticut DSP of the Year

Kumia Lott

Ability Beyond / Bethel, CT



When uncertainty creeps into the room, colleagues look for Kumia, as her calm presence has a way of settling everyone around her. As an assistant program manager supporting 10 people to live independently, she balances oversight with hands-on care, always focusing on what will make their daily lives more secure and fulfilling.

When one woman faced repeated denials for SNAP benefits, Kumia refused to let the matter drop. Her persistence led to the application finally being approved, opening the door not only to groceries and WiFi, but also small joys like treating her sister to lunch and buying birthday gifts for friends. To support another individual with a goal of expanding her social circle, Kumia helped rekindle a long-lost friendship, then arranged and provided transportation for weekly visits and community outings such as pottery painting, apple picking, and bowling.

Kumia rose from an entry-level life skills instructor to assistant program manager after completing a professional development program that prepared direct care staff for advanced roles and leadership. Today, she mentors new team members, supports peer training, and creates a welcoming environment.

2026 Delaware DSP of the Year

Ritchy Corvil

Mosaic / Newark, DE

For Ritchy Corvil, strong relationships are the foundation of good support. He takes time to get to know the people he provides care for—learning their plans and listening carefully to earn lasting trust that empowers people through the ups and downs of daily life.

When Ritchy noticed that Luke didn't have many family connections, he helped arrange a long-awaited reunion in West Virginia. Though Luke hadn't seen his relatives in over a decade, the visit rekindled the relationship and he now regularly writes letters to his aunts and cousins. With another man, Ryan, Ritchy used hands-on projects, library visits, and shared reading to encourage creativity and strengthen literacy skills. By helping Ryan learn the ropes at his mother's store, Ritchy supported the growth of both employment skills and a stronger family connection.

Colleagues note that since Ritchy joined the team at Mosaic, behavioral incidents among those living in the home have dropped—a reflection of the calm, consistent example he sets for others.



2026 District of Columbia DSP of the Year

Jeromy Boler

St. John's Community Services / Washington, DC



On every shift, Jeromy is already thinking a few steps ahead—looking for small ways to smooth the day so the people he supports can take the lead in their own lives. This foresight better positions the people he supports to develop confidence and take a more active role in deciding what each day looks like.

When changes in routine left one person feeling anxious, Jeromy collaborated with them and their family members to create visual schedules and clear step-by-step guides. Noticing another person's interest in cooking, Jeromy adapted recipes and tools so their fine motor challenges wouldn't stand in the way of preparing meals. That same practical creativity led him to design a transit training program that helped several people successfully and independently navigate the bus system.

Jeromy consistently volunteers to mentor new staff and support the team wherever he can. Through his reliability and integrity, he sets the tone for the team to cultivate a workplace culture based on collaboration and respect.

2026 Florida DSP of the Year

Cira Melendez

BrightSpring Health Services / Ocala, FL

Across more than three decades of providing support, Cira has modeled servant leadership at a group home for people with significant support needs. She has a knack for sensing when something has changed, reading the small cues in people's voice and body language that reveal what someone may be feeling.

When one man arrived at the hospital with few belongings for what would turn out to be a two-month stay, Cira sensed that not having clothes that made him feel like himself was unsettling to him in ways he couldn't explain. Cira started with something simple: bringing him a necktie. As the days went on, helping him build a wardrobe that made him feel like himself instead of like a patient—restoring his sense of personal identity and dignity. In another instance she secured adaptive technology in the form of a wireless, voice-activated headset so a man struggling with his brother moving away could speak with him independently.

A quote from Albert Schweitzer perfectly captures the essence of Cira's leadership: "Setting an example is not the main means of influencing each other. It is the only means."



Congratulations, Kumia Lott

ANCOR 2026 CT DSP of the Year

We are thrilled and proud to congratulate Kumia Lott on her selection as the *ANCOR Connecticut DSP of the Year*. Kumia's positivity, reliability, and creativity have established her as a core member of the Ability Beyond team. She is the embodiment of one of our taglines: *You Can Be Impactful*.

"Kumia has built a reputation as our calm during the storm. She consistently goes the extra mile and demonstrates commitment to the people she supports."

- Jess Forgione, *Ability Beyond*
Assistant Program Services Manager



ability beyond

abilitybeyond.org



HONORING THE LEGACY

ADA S. MCKINLEY
COMMUNITY SERVICES, INC

*Thank you, **Sandra Eckhardt**, for being chosen as
the 2026 ANCOR Illinois DSP of the Year.*

*Your dedication and compassion light
paths of hope in our community.*

2026 Georgia DSP of the Year

Wanda Renee Newkirk

Sevita / Fitzgerald, GA



After surviving a devastating house fire that left her injured and displaced, Wanda Renee Newkirk could have taken time to step back. Instead, she stayed in touch with the families she supports and returned to work as soon as she was able. Not long after, she completed a demanding apprenticeship and earned her DSP III designation—another step in a career defined by a commitment to person-centered care.

When one woman wanted to manage her own money, Wanda realized the goal required stronger math skills. She advocated for additional learning tools, then spent time each day practicing number recognition and basic calculations. By understanding the whole person and meeting them where they are, Wanda helped guide her toward greater financial independence.

Wanda also has a special gift for encouraging people who doubt themselves. So when a shy karaoke fan hesitated to step up to the microphone, Wanda didn't just cheer from the sidelines—she walked onto the stage and sang right alongside them.

2026 Hawaii DSP of the Year

Janet Kormondy

Full Life / Holualua, HI

Independence grows through patience and practice, and both are central to Janet Kormondy's work. When someone she supports first tried to request lunch at a restaurant, they would open the door and shout their order. Janet turned the moment into a teaching opportunity, practicing each step together until the person could approach the counter, speak clearly, and request their meal independently and appropriately

Janet consistently looks for ways to make programs more inclusive and person-centered. As a volunteer member of their organization's unity and inclusion club, she contributes ideas that reflect the varied needs and preferences of participants. During a summer celebration, she suggested a silent disco so those who enjoy music and those sensitive to noise could celebrate comfortably together.

Currently pursuing national certification through NADSP accreditation, Janet models growth and professionalism. Her leadership is quiet but steady, rooted in respect and a belief that small steps can open lasting doors.



2026 Idaho DSP of the Year

Kymberly Baldwin

Our Happy Hearts Home / Cottonwood, ID



When some see a lack of options, Kymberly Baldwin envisions possibilities. When a job coach wasn't available for a woman she supports, she stepped in to coordinate with the employee and help them develop the capabilities needed to move forward independently.

Kymberly brings families together through shared events and collaborative efforts—from vacations to fundraisers and rides to activities—that support the “house sisters.” She also develops partnerships within the community that result in employment, volunteering, and recreational opportunities for those in her care, such as Special Olympics bowling. Through these efforts, Kymberly helps the women she supports experience friendship, community belonging, and pride.

By establishing a network of caregivers who work together across homes, Kymberly ensures the house sisters can try new experiences without losing the comfort of familiar support. Her creative approach opens the door to new experiences, helping the women she supports develop confidence and greater autonomy.

2026 Illinois DSP of the Year

Sandra Eckhardt

Ada S. McKinley Community Services / Chicago, IL

Whether outdoors in nature or inside on a quiet afternoon, Sandra Eckhardt looks for ways to make daily routines more meaningful for those she supports.

When she helped revive an overgrown garden, the task became more than a project for the residents she works with, it became a shared effort that grew their skillset. Sandra taught them how to plant, tend, and harvest vegetables of their own. When the first meal from the garden was shared, it carried a sense of pride for everyone involved. On gray afternoons, her “Spa Days on Rainy Days” turn ordinary hours into moments of peace and care.

Sandra’s ability to create a supportive environment for both the people she supports and her colleagues earned her the role of Lead Direct Support Professional. She mentors new staff, emphasizing patience, respect, and person-centered care while encouraging them to see each person as an individual.



2026 Indiana DSP of the Year

Stephen Kibii

Dungarvin / South Bend, IN



When an 18-year-old moved from his family home into an Exceptional Support Needs program, the transition felt overwhelming. The unexpected routines and unfamiliar faces were a lot to take in, and frustration bubbled up quickly. Stephen Kibii met those moments with patience by validating those feelings and coaching him through rising tension, gently reminding him to slow down and breathe.

Over time, the man began to feel safe sharing his thoughts and emotions, and little by little, the difficult moments became easier to navigate. Today, he is preparing to transition out of the group home—a milestone that once felt hard to imagine.

Moments like this are not unusual in Stephen's work. In a home where routines matter and emotions can run high, he emphasizes that every difficult moment can lead to growth. By meeting people with patience and respect, Stephen helps them find their footing and begin imagining a future that may have felt out of reach.

2026 Iowa DSP of the Year

Kirk Vinchattle

One Vision / Webster City, IA

Kirk's approach to care starts with a question: How can I create a space that feels like home for you? Knowing that the men he supports value independence and personal space, he started transforming the garage into a year-round retreat, including music, hobbies, and room for friends. Because the garage was shaped by their ideas, not his, it's become a place that reflects who they are.

That same attention carries into everyday moments. Kirk works closely with the men he supports to help them understand their health, strengthen daily living skills, and take part in decisions that affect them. He treats those routine experiences as opportunities for growth and confidence. Above all, he champions their dignity and encourages them to pursue the activities and experiences that bring meaning to their lives.

Kirk's commitment to community participation helps the men he supports form relationships while also promoting greater understanding of disability supports.



2026 Kansas DSP of the Year

Angelica Zerr

Johnson County Developmental Services / Lawrence, KS



Angelica balances high medical needs, complex behavioral supports, and the daily rhythms of home life with confidence. As a Senior DSP, she is known for stepping into difficult situations and finding a way forward.

When one person with a history of severe mental health challenges was struggling, Angelica didn't focus on the symptoms. Instead, she empowered the person to understand and claim their right to make their own choices. Because of this support, the individual is no longer experiencing self-injurious thoughts.

When a woman with complex needs—who was also facing homelessness—arrived as an emergency placement after months in the hospital, Angelica stepped in to make the transition possible. She coordinated borrowing items and adjusting supports so the person could move in safely.

Angelica leads through mentorship, helping new staff develop the skills and knowledge needed to support individuals as best as possible.

2026 Kentucky DSP of the Year

Sampson Wolloh

Dungarvin / Louisville, KY

Sometimes the smallest celebrations have the greatest meaning. When a staffing issue threatened to cancel a birthday celebration, Sampson organized a shared celebration for two participants, creating an event that honored both individuals and brought everyone together.

Sampson's leadership and compassion extend beyond his primary work location. When he was asked to work temporarily at another home, Sampson encountered an individual with significant behavioral challenges who struggled to connect with staff. Instead of focusing only on the behavior plan, he invested time in learning about the person's interests. Little by little, moments of frustration gave way to calmer exchanges. Sampson then shared his strategies with colleagues, helping strengthen the entire team's approach.

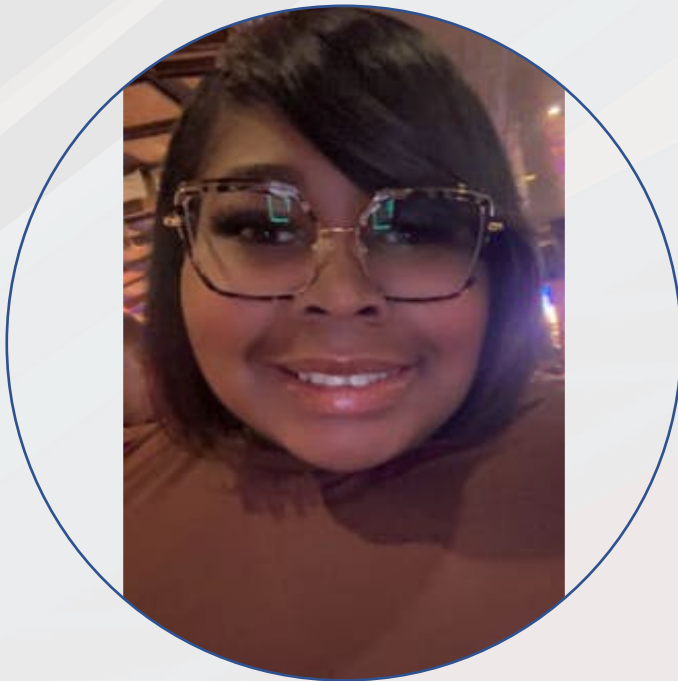
For Sampson, the work is about more than logistics—it's about dignity. He believes person-centered support means creating an environment where participants feel respected, secure, and confident in themselves.



2026 Louisiana DSP of the Year

Anais Naverre

Sevita / Houma, LA



Anais has a gift for turning milestones into memories. Along with ensuring that each of the thirty the individuals in her care plans a themed birthday of her choice, Anais organizes four large annual events for 60 guests across the community's homes: the Night to Shine Prom, Halloween Parade, Christmas Pajama Party, and the Sneaker Ball—each designed to be fully accessible and inclusive. The Sneaker Ball even ensures everyone leaves with a new pair of shoes, creating an event that is both practical and celebratory.

Behind the scenes, Anais maintains the daily rhythm of care, from appointments to medications, while mentoring staff and strengthening morale. Families know she is committed to keeping loved ones connected. Under her leadership, plans on paper become vibrant, shared experiences.

Anais's warmth and charisma—described as the “it” factor—draws clients in and inspires the staff around her. Through her leadership, morale has strengthened and staff turnover across the organization has declined.

2026 Maine DSP of the Year

Kimberly McLaughlin

3Rivers / Island Falls, ME

Kim McLaughlin is the kind of person who turns “maybe someday” into “let’s get started.” She listens closely to the ambitions of the people in her program, then creates pathways to make those goals possible.

When several individuals Kim supports expressed a goal of getting their driver’s licenses, she realized that their rural location would be a hindrance. But she persisted, finding a specialized driver education program for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities two hours away. Then, she worked with another agency, case managers, and service authorizers to hold the course at a halfway location with coordinated support. Her persistence and problem-solving skills made it possible for those in the program to complete the class and move closer to earning their permits.

Whether stepping into a tense home environment or resolving an oxygen equipment emergency hours from home, she moves calmly and decisively. Where others see barriers, Kim focuses on solutions, always keeping the person’s goals at the center.



Congratulations,

Kim McLaughlin

ANCOR 2026 Maine DSP of the Year

3Rivers is proud to have Kim McLaughlin recognized as ANCOR's Maine DSP of the Year. Championing the voices, goals, and desires of the individuals we serve, Kim shows up every day and embodies the highest standards of excellence in community support.

On behalf of everyone at 3Rivers, thank you, Kim, for your commitment to empowering Mainers of all abilities!



3Rivers

Where Community Runs Deep!

www.3-rivers.org





RICHCROFT

**ANCOR'S 2026 Maryland's
Direct Support Professional of the Year!**

Congratulations!

Cherno Jallow

Cherno Jallow, a dedicated Residential DSP, embodies the highest standards of direct support. With compassion, creativity, and persistence, he empowers individuals with IDD and mental health challenges to live fuller, more independent lives. His work at Richcroft demonstrates the true impact of person-centered, professional, and visionary DSP practice.

Cherno's relationship-building is intentional, consistent, and personal. He understands that true belonging cannot be forced but can be cultivated through opportunity, encouragement, and patience. His work ensures the people he supports experience love, respect, and friendship as vital parts of their daily lives.

Congratulations CJ – from your Richcroft Family!



***The mission of Richcroft is to create opportunities and cultivate relationships that enable every person to live their best life.**

2026 Maryland DSP of the Year

Cherno Jallow

Richcroft / Hampstead, MD



At the heart of Cherno's work is a commitment to support that's shaped by personal choice. Instead of making decisions for the people he works with, Cherno helps them explore options and choose the direction they want to take.

Seeing that a man he supports loved art but lacked an outlet, Cherno searched for local classes and attended the first sessions with him. The experience helped him improve his skills while forming friendships with others who shared his passion. With Cherno's encouragement, he eventually displayed his work at a community exhibit, boosting both his confidence and sense of pride.

Within the organization, Cherno is known for leading by example. He mentors new DSPs by demonstrating patient, respectful approaches to challenging situations and helping them grow into confident professionals. During staffing shortages, he reorganized schedules and implemented a peer shadowing system that strengthened training and reduced turnover, reinforcing the culture of support he helped create.

2026 Massachusetts DSP of the Year

Thea Brandolino

The Arc of Opportunity / Fitchburg, MA

Thea's work begins with listening. When a young woman felt overwhelmed by community outings, Thea helped design a personalized routine that included quiet transition time, familiar destinations, and a visual schedule. What once caused anxiety is now a weekly activity she enjoys.

Creating a sense of community comes next. After recognizing that someone she supports had grown socially withdrawn following a move, Thea helped her explore art classes and other local activities that offered new opportunities to socialize. With Thea's encouragement, she formed new friendships and restored her sense of belonging.

Through this approach, growth follows naturally. Thea encourages the people she supports to make their own choices, from planning meals and setting fitness goals to exploring new interests and trying new experiences. She proves that innovation doesn't have to be flashy—it just needs to be rooted in the thoughtful understanding of the people she supports.



2026 Michigan DSP of the Year

Jeffrey Brown III

BrightSpring Health Services / Bellevue, MI



Jeffrey understands that progress begins with patience. When a man he supports hadn't bathed in more than a year, Jeffrey didn't rush the process. Instead, he broke it down into clear steps, showing him how to use soap and a washcloth while encouraging him at each stage. Jeffrey's support helped transform a difficult barrier into a meaningful success. The client now bathes regularly, a boon for their health and independence.

Jeffrey is known for supporting new staff and helping them recognize their strengths in their roles. By sharing his experience, covering shifts when needed, and always putting clients first, he strengthens both the team and the quality of care provided. His encouraging attitude helps create a positive atmosphere for staff and clients alike. But what stands out most is the pride he takes in direct support.

Jeffrey often says he loves his job—and the people he supports feel that passion dedication every day.

2026 Minnesota DSP of the Year

Brenda Olson

Dungarvin / West St. Paul, MN

Brenda Olson is known for staying when things get complicated. When someone temporarily lost access to services, she didn't step back—she stayed in close contact with both the individual and their employer, protecting a hard-earned job. When another person walked away from promising interviews, Brenda responded not with frustration, but with fresh strategies and steady belief in his strengths.

She is equally tenacious in the workplace. To address asthma concerns, Brenda supported a request for reasonable accommodations, including adjusted breaks and modified duties. When a job task proved physically unrealistic, she collaborated with management on a task swap that preserved both productivity and employment.

Brenda's leadership is quiet and practical. She mentors new staff, shares transportation resources, and steps seamlessly into caseload transitions without disruption. Her approach is simple and powerful: remove barriers, protect dignity, and keep momentum moving forward.



2026 Mississippi DSP of the Year

Asia Tucker

Sevita / Gulfport, MS



Asia begins with observation. She watches closely, learning how each person communicates, whether through words, gestures, or small changes others might miss—and her vigilance can be lifesaving. When some she supports showed subtle, nonverbal signs of medical distress that others overlooked, Asia trusted her knowledge and insisted on emergency care. That decision protected a life and reinforced her belief that every voice deserves to be recognized, even without words.

As a Program Coordinator, Asia brings the same focus to her staff. She mentors new direct support professionals, shares practical strategies, and keeps communication flowing among families and clinicians. In the community, she encourages participation in church, volunteer work, and local events so relationships can grow naturally. Asia's work is grounded in dignity, intuition, and an unwavering commitment to protecting and elevating the people she supports.

2026 Missouri DSP of the Year

Christine Vaccaro

St. Louis Arc / Wentzville, MO

When a refugee family arrived in the United States seeking disability services for their son, the systems meant to help them only deepened their confusion. Language barriers and conflicting school recommendations left them unsure where to turn. As a Family Navigator, Christine became their steady guide.

Using Charting the LifeCourse tools and translation services, Christine helped the family clarify their goals and understand their rights. She coordinated conversations among the public school district, an attorney, and immigration social workers, ultimately securing enrollment in the local public school with both language interpretation and appropriate disability accommodations. Along the way, she connected the family to an autism evaluation, behavior therapy, and public benefits.

Christine equips families to advocate for themselves—whether through IEP preparation, benefits applications, or workshops that map out future supports. With patience and cultural sensitivity, she transforms overwhelming systems into pathways families can navigate with confidence.





Congratulations to Christine Vaccaro 2026 Missouri DSP of the Year

Thank you for embodying compassion, leadership, and innovation as a Family Navigator. You ensure that every family you support feels heard, informed, and optimistic about their future.

We are immensely proud of you!

*You truly are the
Arc Advantage!*



Congratulations to Our 2026 Award-Winning Staff!

Thank you for helping people live their best life every day!



Cira Melendez
Florida
DSP of the Year



Anais Naverre
Louisiana
DSP of the Year



Jeffrey Brown III
Michigan
DSP of the Year



Heather Kozak
Nebraska
DSP of the Year



Tashima Ragsdale
New Jersey
DSP of the Year



Tracy Resendez
Texas
DSP of the Year



David Haynes
West Virginia
DSP of the Year

2026 Montana DSP of the Year

Sam Matelich

Opportunity Resources / Missoula, MT



Spend a few minutes around Sam and a pattern becomes clear: Preparation, honesty, and deep respect guide everything he does. When working with someone who struggled to trust others, Sam didn't rush the relationship. He listened first, found mutual interests, then worked on developing a bond with simple but consistent activities. Little by little, the person began to take a more active role in meetings, and speaking up about their goals. Additionally, when a behavioral crisis occurs, Sam focuses less on the behavior and more on the individual's capacity for growth.

He also strengthens continuity of care by attending group therapy sessions alongside the individuals he supports, learning the same tools and language so encouragement continues beyond the clinical setting. Whether creating visual supports or adapting routines to match someone's strengths, Sam approaches every challenge with thoughtfulness and humility. His quiet leadership reminds others that trust, once earned, changes everything.

2026 Nebraska DSP of the Year

Heather Kozak

BrightSpring Health Services / Bennington, NE

Heather's commitment to person-centered support began in a hospital—but it didn't stay there. When she learned that a 12-year-old girl with cerebral palsy risked placement in a nursing facility, Heather made a life-changing decision. Within weeks, she and her husband welcomed her into their home, determined to provide not just medical care, but family.

Since then, Heather has become the young woman's fiercest advocate. When repeated school calls suggested she couldn't be supported in the classroom, Heather didn't let it go. Her persistence led the school to adapt, turning the year into a success. Following a diagnosis of a degenerative neurological condition, Heather assembled a specialized care team and ensured palliative supports were in place, always prioritizing quality of life.

Her advocacy extends to joy, too. A service dog named Wrigley now offers companionship and medical alerts, strengthening comfort and safety.



2026 Nevada DSP of the Year

Rachel Baros

BAI / Las Vegas, NV



Rachel runs her home with precision and lots of heart. Because the three men she supports rarely rely on speech, she pays close attention to the details that reveal how they feel, whether it's a clenched jaw or flash of excitement. She arranges each of their rooms to reflect personality and preference, from wrestling décor to just the right chair for shouting along with a well-loved TV scene.

When one man was described as unwilling to participate in conversations or activities, Rachel slowed the pace and offered clear choices, giving him time to respond. She approaches medical restrictions the same way, protecting health while still giving each man choices about how his day unfolds.

Families trust her because she shows up, whether holding a phone for a quiet call or navigating difficult transitions with grace. As a leader, Rachel sets high expectations and models them herself. What she has built is more than a well-managed house; it's a place where autonomy, warmth, and belonging are daily realities.

2026 New Hampshire DSP of the Year

Tricia Clay

Life Connections Specialized Support Services / Manchester, NH

For 18 years, Tricia has walked beside the woman she supports through seasons of celebration and moments of uncertainty. This past year, as hospice care became part of daily life, her commitment to focus on dignity, joy, and self-expression only got stronger.

Ahead of two recent family weddings, Tricia helped her choose outfits for each event that reflected her personal style, color preferences, and comfort. She worked with the medical team to discreetly incorporate necessary equipment so it functioned properly without affecting her confidence.

Additionally, Tricia recently worked with the hospice team to coordinate a vacation that preserved both medical care and the emotional benefits of travel. By arranging on-site nurse check-ins and adjusting the care schedule, she ensured that the person she supports could fully enjoy outings—such as an amusement park and water park—without missing essential services.



2026 New Jersey DSP of the Year

Tashima Ragsdale

BrightSpring Health Services / Absecon, NJ



Over the past seven years, Tashima—known to many as “Coco”—has brightened the days of those she supports with her energy and creativity. She approaches her role as Lead DSP by focusing on what matters most to the individuals she supports. By inviting them to share their interests, she designs activities that combine enjoyment with learning, such as budgeting practice tied to upcoming outings. Their testimonials speak volumes: “Tashima is the best. She ... likes to go out with me anywhere,” and, “Thank you for never letting me fall.”

Tashima is widely recognized by colleagues as a natural leader. During a snowstorm that threatened staffing levels, she quickly reorganized teams, coordinated transportation, and ensured everyone returned home safely. She later stepped in during a leadership absence, maintaining program operations and communication with families—efforts that helped the program earn a three-year state accreditation.

2026 New Mexico DSP of the Year

Sam Herrera

ENMRSH / Clovis, NM

For nearly three decades, Sam has helped people expand their sense of what is possible. Known for his energy and creativity, he looks for ways to help the people he supports take part in their communities and pursue interests that matter to them. This often means turning his own community connections into opportunities for others. As a referee and volunteer at local high school sporting events, Sam invites individuals he supports to join him as announcers, scorekeepers, or food servers.

The roles have become something they eagerly anticipate—and something the community now expects as well. He has also secured seasonal jobs for three individuals with a summer food program for children, promoting the reliability and value they bring. Each day they interact with nearly one-hundred community members, and the opportunity continues to return year after year thanks to their professionalism and Sam's support.



2026 New York DSP of the Year

Robin Kestler

The Resource Center / Asheville, NY



After 30 years in the field, Robin has a nickname among her colleagues: ‘The Legend.’ Her approach begins with listening. In her day program, participants help shape the activities and lessons themselves, ensuring everyone has opportunities to explore interests that matter to them.

Robin’s dedication also extends beyond her workplace. When a woman who had been living with her was seriously injured and partially paralyzed, Robin drove 90 minutes each day to visit her in the hospital and advocate for the best care. Later, she and her family modified their home so the woman could return and live with them again.

Robin also nurtures strong ties between the program and the community—partnering with local organizations, supporting community garden projects, and creating events like a music enrichment festival. Through decades of service, Robin has helped create spaces where people grow, contribute, and feel deeply connected.

2026 North Carolina DSP of the Year

Dawn Gardner

LIFESPAN Services / Greensboro, NC

At LIFESPAN's Chefspan cooking program, the lesson might begin with knife safety or a discussion about grocery budgets, but it quickly becomes something more. Under Dawn Gardner's guidance, participants learn the practical skills that make independence possible—planning meals, working as a team, and building confidence in the kitchen.

When a man named Tony joined the class, Dawn noticed his enthusiasm right away. She encouraged him to create a signature dish for a community cooking competition and helped the group develop a sauce to accompany it. The result—"LIFESPAN Sizzling Secret Sauce"—was such a hit that judges suggested Tony consider turning the idea into a business.

In her more than 16 years as a DSP, Dawn has helped individuals succeed in workplaces across the county, building relationships with employers and supporting people in competitive jobs. She also keeps the Chefspan program thriving through partnerships, donations, and community collaborations.



We congratulate our own
ROBIN KESTLER
on being named ANCOR's
DSP of the Year
for New York State!



At The Resource Center, Robin is known as **The Legend** — partly for the ways in which she has provided supports and opportunities to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and partly for how she has mentored co-workers during her 30-year career. Robin leaves a legacy of supporting people to learn skills, develop hobbies, share their talents, enjoy unique experiences, and become valued members of their communities.



Congratulations, Cassidy!

ANCOR 2026 Direct Support Professional of the Year



Your compassion, leadership, and commitment represent the extraordinary impact Direct Support Professionals have on the lives of the people they support.

We are so grateful to Cassidy and all DSPs across the country whose dedication and skill make it possible for people with developmental disabilities to build lives full of belonging, independence, and opportunity in their communities.



AbleLight is a national nonprofit with more than 120 years of experience supporting people with developmental disabilities through residential, employment, and community-based programs and services.



Learn more at [AbleLight.org](https://www.ablelight.org)

2026 North Dakota DSP of the Year

Gerilynn ‘Gigi’ Griffith

Sevita / Grafton, ND



Many of the young people placed in Gigi’s care arrive carrying the impact of trauma—frightened, withdrawn, and unsure who they can rely on. Gigi knows that before anything else can happen, she must first help them feel safe.

One child arrived barely speaking, communicating mostly through yelling or hitting. Gigi began with simple routines, songs, play, and consistent encouragement. Over time, the girl learned new words, began sleeping in a bed, and found better ways to express what she needed. Sometimes the progress appeared in small moments. One day, when the girl raised her hand in anger, Gigi calmly reminded her, “Hands are for hugs.” The child paused, repeated the phrase, and hugged her instead.

Gigi fills the girls’ lives with moments worth celebrating—special outings, birthdays, and small milestones that remind them they belong. With every song, outing, and quiet moment of encouragement, Gigi helps children begin to believe the world can be a safe place again.

2026 Ohio DSP of the Year
Blair Whitt

LADD / Cincinnati, OH

In the home where Blair Whitt works, the kitchen is often filled with conversation about what to cook next. The women she supports choose their favorite healthy recipes, then Blair guides them in shopping for groceries and preparing the meals. Over time, those shared lessons have grown into the confidence to cook on their own.

Blair also helps those she discover talents they didn't know they had and might never have explored. When two women she supports attended a downtown marathon, they noticed their friends who use wheelchairs couldn't find an accessible bathroom. Determined to change that, they prepared to bring the issue to city leaders, practicing their remarks with Blair beforehand. When the day came, Blair stayed in the hallway while they met with elected officials, so their voices—not hers—guided the conversation.

Their advocacy worked. Cincinnati City Council passed a resolution requiring accessible bathrooms and clear signage at all city-sponsored events, ensuring future gatherings are welcoming to everyone.



2026 Oklahoma DSP of the Year

Jene Morris

Dungarvin / Oklahoma City, OK



Some people solve problems with plans and paperwork, but Jene Morris starts with a set of tools. A skilled builder, he often creates practical solutions that make everyday life more comfortable for the people he supports. For example, when a teenager began collecting toy cars, Jene designed a bed with a built-in display so the collection could become part of his room.

The same care appears in the way he connects with others. Whether sharing a rock concert with a young music fan or designing rooms around each child's passions, Jene creates spaces that feel personal.

Jene regularly collaborates with schools, therapists, and families to advocate for the children he supports and to ensure their needs are understood. Through creativity, patience, and quiet dedication, Jene helps build not only physical spaces, but also a genuine sense of belonging.

2026 Oregon DSP of the Year

Cassidy Eckert

AbleLight / Beaverton, OR

Cassidy Eckert pays close attention to small signals others might miss—a shift in posture, a change in expression, a brief gesture that reveals how someone is feeling. Several of the people she supports communicate without words, so Cassidy has learned how to read those cues with care. She shares what she notices with her colleagues, helping the entire team recognize these forms of communication and respond in ways that respect each person's preferences and needs.

Cassidy plays an important role in strengthening the team. When challenges arise, she's often the first to pause, acknowledge what could have been done differently, and talk it through with her colleagues. That openness turns mistakes into learning moments and encourages others to approach challenges without fear. Cassidy mentors both new and experienced direct support professionals, helping them prepare for licensing reviews and work through conflicts with confidence.

By sharing what she has learned, she helps create a team culture where people support one another and stay focused on the needs of those in their care.



2026 Pennsylvania DSP of the Year

Melody May

The Arc Northeastern Pennsylvania / Clifford Township, PA



When a resident arrived at a home following a traumatic experience, they kept their distance—avoiding eye contact, declining activities, and staying withdrawn. Melody May knew that she needed to rebuild trust, but that would take patience and small gestures. Sometimes that meant just sitting nearby during meals, offering quiet reassurance without asking for anything in return.

Over time, those small moments made a difference. The resident gradually began to open up, join group outings, and even decorate their living space—all signs that Melody's efforts had worked and they felt part of the community.

Melody brings that same thoughtful approach to everyone she supports. She adapts activities to match individual interests, introduces creative tools like visual schedules or art-based engagement, and encourages people to make choices about their daily lives. Colleagues and families often note the warmth and patience she brings to every interaction. For Melody, person-centered care means recognizing the whole person and helping them rediscover their place in the community.

2026 Rhode Island DSP of the Year

Amy Barada

West Bay RI / West Kingston, RI

Communication takes many forms, so Amy Barada's work begins by listening closely to each type. When supporting a man who communicates through gestures and physical cues, Amy pays careful attention to subtle signals that others might miss. When routines shift and he becomes uncomfortable, Amy carefully observes his cues, recognizing them as important ways he communicates his needs and boundaries.

Amy also works to build strong relationships beyond the home. Each year, she helps organize participation in a local community garden, where the people she supports collaborate with neighbors, share responsibilities, and build friendships.

She also encourages people to pursue passions that bring purpose and pride. A man she supports makes and sells homemade dog treats, and Amy has helped allow that to be possible by working with vendors and customers, even through supply challenges. For Amy, support means helping people feel part of something larger, encouraging self-reliance alongside strong community relationships.



Rhode Island's
DSP of the Year

Congratulations
**AMY
BARADA**



The West Bay RI community proudly recognizes Amy Barada for the impact she brings each day. Your creativity, commitment and genuine connection to the people you support help create meaningful opportunities and stronger community experiences. You lead with integrity, respect, and a true sense of purpose, and we are grateful to have you as part of our team.

SEVITA HEALTH



SEVITA HEALTH

Congratulations to Fermaicko “MAMA” Bookman South Carolina’s 2026 DSP of the YEAR!

Fermaicko Bookman is what we want and need in a Direct Support Professional. She demonstrates daily that beauty still exists within humanity. Ms. Bookman encourages leadership, colleagues, and individuals to become better versions of themselves than the day prior and challenges us all to go beyond standing for what is right — but what is righteous. Ms. Bookman is a phenomenal human being and we are more than honored that her commitment to the individuals we support will be recognized nationally.

“Move around it, climb over it, or go through it — but quitting is not an option.”

— *Fermaicko Bookman*

sevitahealth.com

Sevita

2026 South Carolina DSP of the Year

Fermaicko Bookman

Sevita / Columbia, SC



Around her workplace, Fermaicko is affectionately known as “Mama Bookman,” a nickname that reflects both her warmth and how she guides those around her. For more than a decade, she has been the cheerleader for the people she cares for, encouraging them to see themselves as able to surmount obstacles and do more than what they believed possible. “Move around it, climb over it, or go through it, but quitting is not an option,” she frequently says.

That encouragement made a difference for one individual with a pattern of aggressive behavior who struggled to keep a job. The employer said they wouldn’t be able to stay employed, but Fermaicko stepped in with coaching, additional support, and consistent advocacy on their behalf. With her help, the individual succeeded in keeping the job.

Fermaicko’s leadership is equally evident among her colleagues. When supervisors are away, she helps maintain stability in the home and supports staff through challenging situations.

2026 South Dakota DSP of the Year

Sasha Fontaine

Aspire / Aberdeen, SD

Working with people who communicate without words requires careful observation and trust. Sasha Fontaine has built both. As a team lead supporting individuals with profound disabilities, she pays close attention to changes in body language, breathing patterns, and vocal cues—details that can reveal when something isn't right.

In one situation, Sasha's attentiveness led her to notice "gurgling" in Paula's breathing after she came back from a nursing home rehabilitation stay. Sasha trusted her instincts and pushed for further evaluation, which revealed a life-threatening case of pneumonia and septic shock. Because she spoke up, the individual received urgent treatment in time.

Beyond medical advocacy, Sasha played a key role in helping Paula reconnect with her family, including a reunion with her mother after 50 years apart. The renewed relationship strengthened the support Paula received during medical care. Even during Paula's hospital stay, Sasha stayed involved, helping keep family and care teams connected.



2026 Tennessee DSP of the Year

Alicia Garrett

Bios / Columbia, TN



When Alicia Garrett saw that the gentleman she supports struggled to communicate verbally, she didn't wait for a perfect solution—she created one. Using simple materials and a thoughtful idea, Alicia designed a velcro picture book that allows him to express where he wants to go and what he would like to do. The tool turned communication into something interactive and enjoyable, giving him a clearer way to share his preferences.

But Alicia's work extends far beyond problem-solving. She has welcomed the man she supports into her own family life, ensuring he participates in gatherings, celebrations, and outings alongside the people closest to her. Because of that inclusion, he has developed a wider circle of relationships and a stronger sense of belonging.

Rather than seeking recognition, Alicia leads by doing what needs to be done. Her willingness to step in and support others helps create a team culture centered on reliability and person-centered care for every person she supports.

2026 Texas DSP of the Year

Tracy Carmona

BrightSpring Health Services / Levelland, TX

Over the past three decades, Tracy Carmona has built a warm, inclusive home where the residents she works with feel both comfortable and capable. She prepares meals with them, establishes daily routines, and encourages everyone to take part in the shared responsibilities of the household.

Through that structure, individuals develop skills, confidence, and a sense of purpose in their everyday lives—and those days that aren't as standard.

One day, during a routine pickup from day habilitation, Tracy suddenly found herself driving through a severe dust storm that reduced visibility to zero. Unable to safely pull over, she remained calm, called 911, and focused on protecting everyone in the van until police arrived to guide them to safety. Thanks to her quick thinking, everyone arrived home safely.



2026 Utah DSP of the Year

Leo Unopulos

Chrysalis / Nephi, UT



Leo Unopulos spends just one scheduled day each week supporting the men in his home, yet his impact reaches far beyond those hours. He has formed a particularly strong bond with Chris, a young man who is blind and has limited verbal communication. Through patience and creativity, Leo has helped Chris learn to navigate his community with a walking stick and develop new language skills.

Their outings together often turn into small adventures. On a trip to an amusement park—Chris’s first—Leo planned the day carefully, driving him separately to avoid sensory overload and surprising him with matching shirts to mark the occasion. The day reflected Leo’s deep understanding of what would make the experience both joyful and accessible.

Leo has also helped rebuild Chris’s connection with his father, who lives an hour away, by organizing video calls and working toward an in-person visit. He recently connected with a new intern joining Chris’s support team, offering his perspective on how to best support Chris moving forward—a fitting example of his ongoing commitment to quality support.

2026 Vermont DSP of the Year

Derek Labrie

Howard Center / Burlington, VT

For two decades, Derek Labrie has built a reputation as someone who always steps up when help is needed most. He begins every interaction with respect while prioritizing autonomy, ensuring that the people he supports have opportunities to be heard. To ensure this with one person who used a facilitated communication device, Derek also learned how to use the system so their voice could be clearly understood by others.

His attentiveness also proves critical in moments of crisis. During a group activity, a new staff member was supporting an individual when they began to have a seizure. Knowing the person's tendencies, Derek immediately stepped in to ensure there wasn't any food in his cheeks and cleared his airway while others called for medical help.

Derek regularly mentors new DSPs and helps case managers gain a clearer understanding of the individuals in their care. His commitment to teamwork and training helps ensure staff feel confident supporting people with complex needs.



2026 Virginia DSP of the Year

Mulu Haile

L'Arche Greater Washington, DC / Arlington, VA



In a field where turnover is high, Mulu Haile's seventeen years of service stand out—not just for the length of time, but for the care she brings to each day. As an overnight assistant supporting adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, her work often happens quietly while others sleep. However, even during demanding shifts, Mulu looks for ways to adapt routines to reflect the wishes of the people she supports.

When residents asked for the chance to sleep in on weekends, for example, Mulu willingly stayed past the end of her shift so they could wake at the time they preferred. It was a small adjustment that sent the big message that their preferences matter.

Rather than emphasizing her years of experience, Mulu focuses on helping others succeed. By guiding new staff and working collaboratively with her team, she contributes to a home where everyone feels respected and supported.

2026 Washington DSP of the Year

Belinda Salazar Johnson

Puffin Island / Ferndale, WA

When sleep doesn't come easily, bedtime brings challenges. When Belinda Salazar Johnson realized that someone she cares for struggled with sleeping, she created a nightly ritual that built upon their love of popcorn and movies. Over time, the routine began to do more than fill the evening. By turning hygiene and bedtime preparation into part of the ritual, Belinda helped transform a tough evening transition into a predictable and comforting experience.

The person needed that same smooth transition in the mornings, too, along with the ability to make their own decisions. Belinda always offers choice in food, hygiene, and clothes. On weekends, she adds another touch: breakfast in bed, turning what had once been a stressful morning into something to look forward to.

Even with the limits of night-shift work, Belinda encourages connections with family and friends through emails, calls, and social plans. With her consistent care, Belinda ensures that every evening ends and every morning begins with familiarity and comfort.



2026 West Virginia DSP of the Year

David Haynes

BrightSpring Health Services / Princeton, WV



David Haynes knows that meaningful progress rarely happens all at once, and he supports people with the patience it takes to get there. When a man he supports was preparing to move into his own home but struggled with severe anxiety about the transition, David created a gradual plan: Start with short visits, bring a few belongings at a time, and gradually increase the time spent in the space. Over two months, those careful steps helped the man settle comfortably into independent living.

David also prioritizes maintaining strong relationships, whether it's by setting up video calls with a person's out-of-town family or planning cookouts and potlucks for socialization. His ability to interpret nonverbal communication often helps reduce frustration and strengthen understanding between friends and family members. By focusing on trust and connection, David helps people take on new challenges without losing the support that makes progress possible.

2026 Wisconsin DSP of the Year
Victoria Ward

Dungarvin / Fitchburg, WI

Victoria Ward focuses on helping people define and reach their own goals. When someone she supports set her sights on meaningful employment, Victoria wouldn't let her settle for any job available. Instead, she helped the woman search for a role aligned with her interests, then guided her through the process of applying and interviewing. Victoria helps her maintain that employment while navigating complex workplace relationships. Today, she is succeeding at work and building strong community connections.

Stories like this are common in Victoria's work. When a person she supports wanted to be more independent in the community yet felt hesitant, Victoria wasn't satisfied with offering a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, she designed a personalized routine that included greeting neighbors and visiting local stores.

Victoria passes this approach onto new members of the team by welcoming them to shadow her during shifts. In doing so, she demonstrates how listening, communication, and understanding support plans should guide high-quality care.



2026 Wyoming DSP of the Year

Amy Hassinger

Sevita / Cheyenne, WY



Everyday skills—from remembering medication to doing laundry—are essential for living independently. As such, every plan that Amy Hassinger develops starts with a person’s vision for their own life.

When one person that Amy supports wanted more control over their meals, she helped them create grocery lists and experiment with new recipes. Another person hoped to become more involved in the community, so Amy encouraged them to join the Special Olympics and celebrated alongside them at every event. By introducing budgeting tools to another person she supports, Amy helped them save up for a special purchase.

These small victories show how Amy helps turn personal goals into true accomplishments. With patience and encouragement, she helps people see what they’re capable of—and gives them the confidence to aim even higher.

Congratulations to our outstanding team members!

Thank you for your
commitment to helping
others and making
a difference in the lives
of the people we serve.



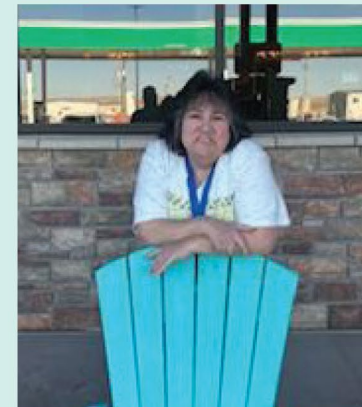
Asia Tucker
REM Mississippi



Gerilyn "Gigi" Griffith
REM North Dakota



Fermaicko Bookman
South Carolina Mentor



Amy Hassinger
Bridges of Wyoming



Congratulations to all the DSP of the Year Award winners.

Thank you for your hard work,
dedication, and exemplary service.

As an ANCOR Diamond Partner, Relias is
proud to recognize the amazing work DSPs
do to support individuals in meaningful ways.



[Learn More](#)

RELIAS
relias.com

ANCOR

