
Front Line Supervisor Stability Within the Intellectual Disability Field

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Abstract

Survey data collected over a ten year period were reviewed in an effort to assess the stability of the Front Line Supervisor position within the intellectual disability field. It was determined that salary growth essentially matched the rate of inflation, but were sufficient to be considered a living wage for only single individuals with no children. Both turnover and vacancy rates increased over time, reaching 32.9% and 13.4% in the final year of study, respectively.

Keywords: Front Line Supervisor, salary, turnover, vacancy

The Direct Support Professional workforce “crisis” in the intellectual disability field has received considerable attention in both the general press and in the professional literature. Both the President’s Commission for People with Intellectual Disabilities (2017) and the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (2016) identified the situation as a crisis. The primary concern is that agencies are generally unable to hire a sufficient number of individuals to provide direct care, supports, and services to individuals who have intellectual disability. Turnover is typically in excess of 40% per year, while at any given point in time, as many as 22% of Direct Support Professional positions may be open (Consortium, 2024). It is clear that the continuing demand for Direct Support Professionals exceeds the supply, despite governmental efforts to increase wages for Direct Support Professionals.

While concern over turnover and vacancies among Direct Support Professionals is well warranted, consideration must also be given to the position that typically exists one step above the Direct Support Professional in the corporate hierarchy of most agencies. The Front Live Supervisor is responsible for the day to day supervision of Direct Support Professionals working in one or more group homes. Based on data collected in Pennsylvania surveys, there appears that each Front Live Supervisor oversees the work of 12 Direct Support Professionals (Consortium, 2024). Data collected as part of the National Core Indicator project (2024) suggest a slightly more favorable 1:9 ratio. In addition to their supervisory responsibilities, many Front Line Supervisors also provide direct client support for some portion of their work week.

The published literature on Front Line Supervisor positions in the intellectual disability field seems to focus on leadership and the programmatic impact of Front Line Supervisors (Deveau & McGill, 2014; Beadle-Brown, Bigby, & Bould, 2015). Bogenschutz, Hewitt, Nord, &

Hepperlen (2014) were among the few researchers to focus on tradition workforce metrics, reporting an average hourly wage of \$15.45 in 2014. Other metrics, such as turnover and vacancy rate, generally seem to be lacking. Even the comprehensive The National Core Indicator Project (2025) limits its analysis of the Front Line Supervisor position to demographics, with no reference to pay, turnover, or vacancy rate.

While there has been considerable political attention devoted to the Direct Support Professional workforce crisis, it is unclear whether the Front Line Supervisor workforce experiences the same degree of challenges. In an effort to gain some perspective on this question, the typical workforce parameters (Pay, Turnover, and Vacancy Rate) for Front Line Supervisors were examined over a ten year period.

Data Collection

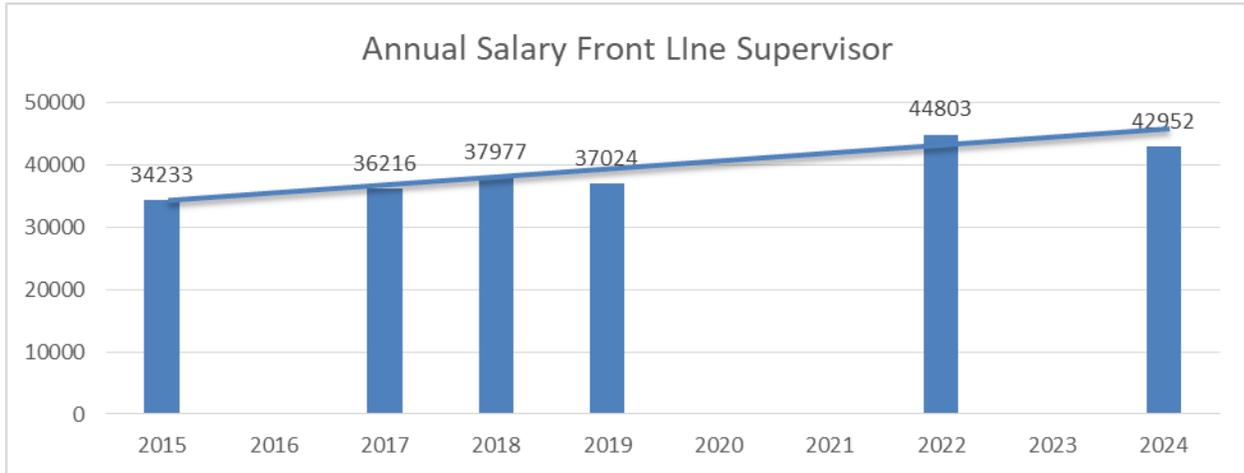
A retrospective analysis of existing data was the basis of this project. An ever-changing group of Pennsylvania provider associations have been objectively monitoring a variety of workforce metrics in the intellectual disability field since 2015. The 2015 survey, with minor modifications, was repeated in 2017, 2018, 2019, 2022, and 2024. The sponsoring agencies evolved over time, with the project coming under the leadership of the Center for Disability Analysis, a Pennsylvania research group. The participating provider associations were PAR, MAX, RCPA, The Alliance CSP, ARC of Pennsylvania, The Provider Alliance, and UCP of Pennsylvania. Note that the principal investigator remained a constant across each of the surveys.

Participating provider associations invited their membership to complete surveys regarding their workforce. Participation varied; this is not a true longitudinal study, but rather a cross-sectional study repeated multiple times. Sample sizes varied from 104 to 170 participating agencies. Based on Pennsylvania's estimated 55,000 Direct Support Professionals (Rick Smith, Office of Developmental Programs, personal communication), it is estimated that the sampling captured roughly 65% of all Direct Support Professionals in Pennsylvania.

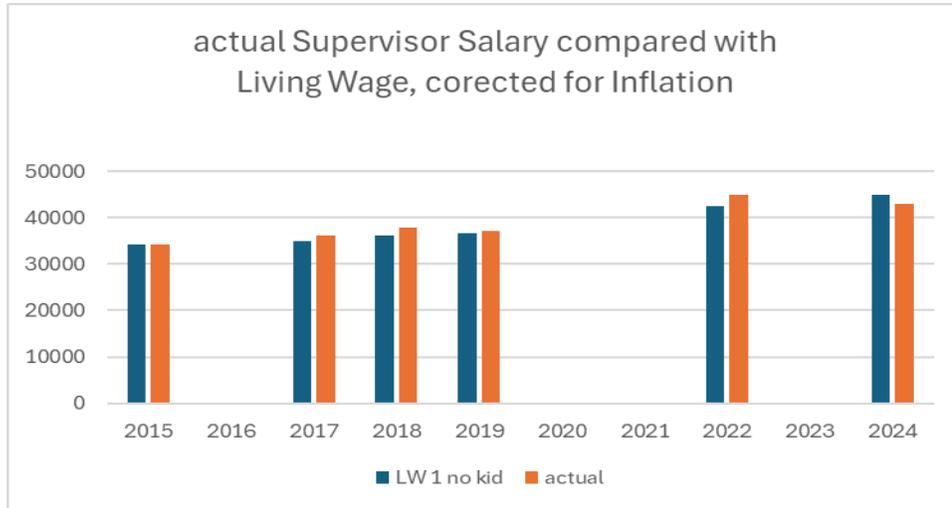
Results

The six surveys of Pennsylvania agencies were reviewed and summarized for the purposes of this report. Information regarding pay, turnover, and vacancy rate for Front Line Supervisors were key metrics.

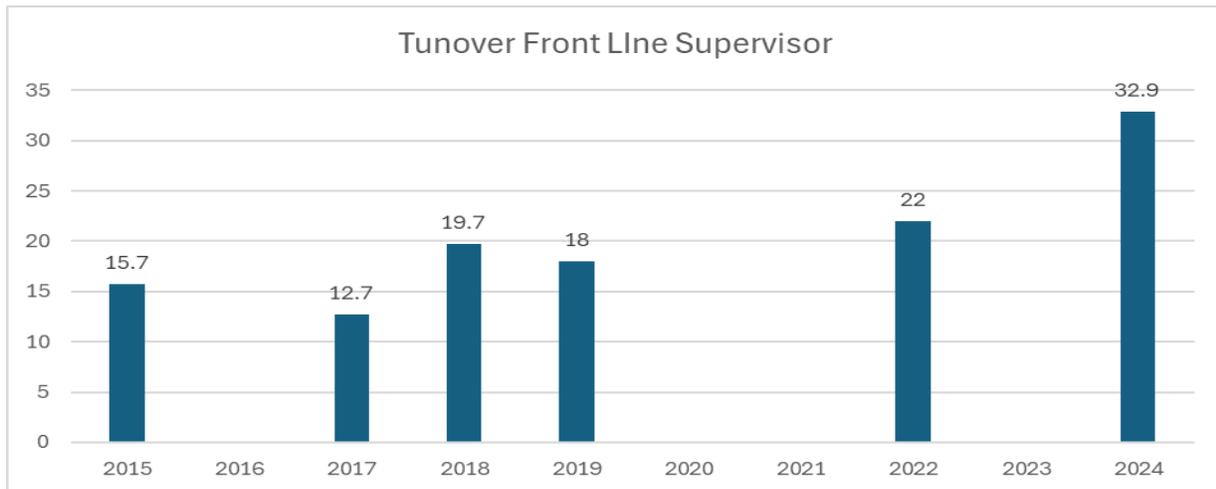
Annual Salary - The figure immediately below depicts the annual salaries for Front Line Supervisors in each year studied. A clear modest upward trend in annual salary is noted. The Bureau of Labor Statistics inflation calculator (undated) was used to project the 2015 annual salary forward, and that project appears as a blue line on the graph below. The data clearly suggest that Front Line Supervisor salary has been consistent with inflationary trends over the ten years of study.



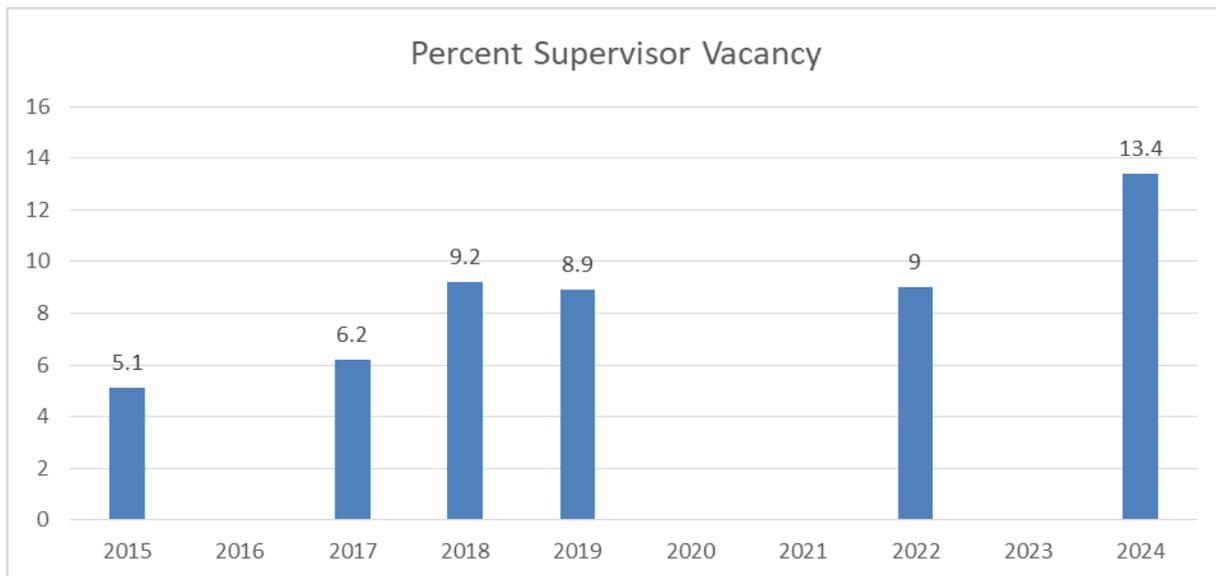
Using the MIT Living Wage Calculator (undated) and the Bureau of Labor Statistics Inflation Calculator (undated), the comparability of the actual pay rate and the cost of living in Dauphin County Pennsylvania (note that the capital of Pennsylvania is within Dauphin County) were compared. These data, presented in the figure below, suggest that the annual salary for a Front Line Professional has consistently approximated the Living Wage for a single person with no children. If a single child is added to the family, the comparability no longer pertains.



Turnover - Turnover is the most frequently cited workforce metric; It is simply the number of employees who separated within a given time (typically a year) divided by the number of employees working. It is presented as a percentage. With regard to the Front Line Supervisors, turnover appears to have increased over time, from 15.7% in 2015 to 32.9% in 2024. An increase in turnover rate is suggested in the post-COVID period of time.



Vacancy Rate - Vacancy rate is viewed as an existential threat with regard to Direct Support Professionals (Spreat, 2024), it is perhaps a lesser concern with regard to Front Line Supervisors. Vacancies within Front Line Supervisors tend to be filled from the ranks of Direct Support Professionals. In a sense, a Front Line Supervisor vacancy is often quickly shifted to a vacancy among Direct Support Professionals. Despite this fact, a modest increase is noted over time. These data are presented below:



Discussion

These data suggest a contemporary annual turnover rate in excess of 30% with about 13% of Front Line Supervisor positions currently open. Clearly, the situation is less dire than that of the Direct Support Professional position, but it must be recognized that a 30% turnover rate is both

expensive and disruptive of solid management practices. To some extent the Front Line Supervisor workforce is somewhat protected by a waiting pool of potential Front Line Supervisors currently working within the agency as Direct Support Professionals. Many Front Line Supervisors were promoted from Direct Support Professional positions.

The data collected over a ten-year period reveal that Front Line Supervisor salaries have largely kept up with inflation. While this is certainly favorable, it is clear that these salary increases have been insufficient to prevent the worsening of both turnover and vacancy rates. It has been suggested (Spreat, 2024) that the right wage for a position is the wage that is associated with complete or near complete hiring. The combined turnover and vacancy rates suggest that greater salaries are needed. It should be understood that "salary" is used to refer to a broader compensation package, not just hourly wage.

It should be recognized that for some portion of the Front Line Supervisor workforce, the position is one from which an individual is promoted to a better position – like a program manager position. This growth potential will increase turnover (both here and in Direct Support Professionals), but it will also contribute to the flattening of the wages because it is likely that a newly hired Front Line Supervisor will be paid a bit less than Front Line Supervisors with more seniority.

By comparison with Direct Support Professionals, the situation with regard to Front Line Supervisors is better, but 30% turnover in the primary management position is unacceptable. Mercer (2015) has reported approximately 6.3% turnover for management positions, while SHRM(2025) reported 18% turnover for front line management. Overall, the data suggest that the Direct Support Professional workforce challenges are creeping into the Front Line Supervisor workforce in the intellectual disability field.

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