The Case for Adopting the SOC in NYS: Improving Direct Support Worker Compensation and Service Quality

In New York State (NYS), the direct support workforce plays a crucial role in assisting individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). These professionals, known as direct support workers (DSWs) or direct support professionals (DSPs), provide essential services to people with disabilities, enabling them to live more independent and fulfilling lives. Recently, New York Governor Kathy Hochul announced an $850 million investment to enhance developmental disability services, including higher reimbursement rates for service providers. While this funding is a step in the right direction, questions remain about how these funds should be allocated and whether they will effectively address the challenges faced by the direct support workforce.

The Challenges of Distributing Funding Without Standardized Classifications

A key concern is that increasing reimbursement rates alone may not be the most effective way to distribute additional funding. In New York State, there is a lack of standardized classifications for direct support workers. Job titles for DSWs/DSPs vary widely across organizations, creating confusion and disparities in compensation and job expectations. Without a consistent framework, service providers may struggle to ensure that funding is used to its full potential.

Furthermore, budget planning and the effective distribution of funding become even more complicated without job classification systems like the **Standard Occupational Classification (SOC)**. In today's world, effective budgeting requires the ability to calculate and target specific groups or recipients based on defined categories. For instance, if job titles and roles are not standardized, it becomes nearly impossible to calculate how many classified recipients (DSWs/DSPs) are necessary to meet the demand for services. Much like how an **IP address** is used to direct information accurately to a specific recipient in a network, standardized classifications enable proper allocation of funding to where it's most needed.

Without classification, the distribution of funding becomes a shot in the dark. How can you calculate the number of DSWs/DSPs needed for each service area, ensure they are

properly compensated, and ensure the funds will address gaps in services without clear data on their roles, numbers, and geographic locations?

The Role of the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) System

The **Standard Occupational Classification (SOC)** system, established by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, provides a framework for classifying occupations based on the tasks, skills, education, and training required for each role. The SOC system serves as a comprehensive classification of services, aligning job titles with clear definitions and standards.

In the context of DSWs/DSPs, adopting the SOC system at the state level could have profound benefits. The SOC system would:

- **Standardize Job Titles and Classifications**: By aligning job titles across the state and ensuring consistency in the responsibilities and qualifications for each role, the SOC system would create greater clarity in terms of compensation and expectations. This would help reduce discrepancies in wages and ensure fairness across different service providers.
- **Facilitate Better Wage Distribution**: With SOC classifications, the distribution of additional funding could be more effective, targeting areas where wage disparities exist. Instead of a blanket increase in reimbursement rates, the funds could be allocated based on the specific needs of each occupation, ensuring that those in the most critical or demanding roles receive appropriate compensation.
- **Improve Service Quality and Workforce Stability**: The SOC system does not only define job titles; it also sets clear guidelines for job performance, skills, and education. This allows for better feedback mechanisms, enabling employers to assess the quality of care provided by DSWs/DSPs. When job roles and expectations are clearly defined, service providers can implement more targeted recruitment and retention strategies, leading to improved job satisfaction and higher retention rates within the workforce.
- **Provide a Clear Feedback Loop**: The SOC framework allows for better integration with payroll systems and performance evaluation tools. When job titles and tasks are clearly defined, feedback systems can be more effectively tied to compensation. This helps ensure that wage increases are aligned with workers' performance and the quality of care they provide.

The Need for Support Service Standards

While the SOC system provides a framework for classifying jobs, it does not specify how services should meet the unique needs of individuals with IDD or address the

requirements of DSWs/DSPs. This gap highlights the need for **support service standards** that build on the SOC classifications. These standards should:

1. **Clarify how SOC-defined services should meet the needs of individuals with IDD**: By addressing the specific care requirements for individuals with disabilities, service standards can ensure that DSWs/DSPs are equipped to deliver the highest quality care.
2. **Provide practical guidance for service providers and workers**: With clear, actionable standards, service providers can better align their operations with best practices and ensure that workers are adequately trained and supported.
3. **Enhance consistency and quality across service providers**: As standards are tested and refined at the provider level, they can be elevated to industry-wide regulations. This ensures that all service providers, regardless of size or location, meet the same high standards.

AMSI's Role in Advancing Standards

The **American Support Standards Institute (AMSI)** plays a critical role in filling this gap by developing and promoting support service standards aligned with the SOC system. AMSI's mission is to create universally recognized standards that focus on practical, inclusive, and sustainable approaches to service delivery. By working closely with service providers and stakeholders, AMSI aims to ensure that the SOC framework is applied effectively to address the needs of individuals with IDD and the direct support workforce.

Conclusion

Governor Hochul's $850 million investment in developmental disability services is an important step toward improving compensation and workforce stability for direct support workers. However, without a clear classification system like the SOC at the state level, this funding may not be distributed effectively, and the long-term challenges in the sector may remain. By adopting the SOC system and establishing support service standards, New York State can ensure that additional funding not only improves wages but also strengthens the quality of care provided to individuals with IDD. This comprehensive approach will help create a more equitable and sustainable system for both service providers and the people they support.