



# Standards and Certification in Disability Services: Closing the Accountability Gap

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## Summary

This article examines why services for people with disabilities lack the same system of standardization and certification that protects quality in industries. Unlike market sectors, disability services are funded by government agencies rather than by the people receiving support. This weakens natural market incentives, reduces accountability, and leaves gaps in safety and quality. The analysis compares current practices in disability services with proven approaches from technical industries and outlines how standards, service certification, personal certification, and regulatory integration can strengthen accountability.

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## Highlights

- **Funding Gap:** In disability services, money comes from government, not directly from clients, breaking the natural link between quality and payment.
- **Incentive Gap:** Managers are oriented toward meeting the expectations of funding agencies and maintaining contracts, rather than focusing on the quality of services delivered to clients.
- **Safety Gap:** In industries, failures bring penalties; in disability services, consequences are rare unless there is death or scandal.
- **Accreditation vs. Certification:** Accreditation verifies organizational readiness, but certification is needed to confirm that quality is delivered in practice.
- **Personal vs. Service Certification:** Staff can be certified individually, but this checks only competence, not whether services as a whole are safe and effective. Service certification is required to ensure real outcomes.
- **Cost Effectiveness:** Certification reduces waste in bureaucracy and prevents costly failures, saving public funds in the long run.

- **Standardizing Intangible Services:** Healthcare, IT, and education show that complex services can be standardized and certified; disability services are no exception.
  - **Global Scale:** Hundreds of standards bodies and tens of thousands of standards prove that large-scale standardization is both possible and effective.
  - **Policy Dimension:** Industries push governments to adopt standards into law (OMB Circular A-119 in the U.S.); disability services rarely ground advocacy in standards, making reforms fragile.
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## Key Message

Disability services remain vulnerable because they lack the rigorous chain of standards, certification, and regulatory backing that industries rely upon. Accreditation alone is insufficient — it checks ability on paper but not quality in practice. Personal certification verifies the competence of staff but does not guarantee service outcomes. At the same time, managers are rewarded for keeping funding agencies satisfied rather than ensuring better results for clients. This creates weak incentives for real quality improvement. To ensure safety, accountability, and the best use of public funds, disability services must adopt consensus-based standards, verify both staff competence and service delivery through certification, and link reforms to enforceable regulation.

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