

OASIS · AT A GLANCE

How caregivers become unpaid DSPs

Nobody hands you a job offer. The direct support shift just goes uncovered long enough that you pick it up yourself, and then it never gets handed back.

BY JIM PALASTY · 12 MIN READ · THE LABOR NOBODY PUT ON PAYROLL

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HOURS A WEEK, UNPAID

A full-time direct support job, absorbed by a parent, with no wage, no shift change, and no end date.

How it works

THREE STEPS

STEP 1

A DSP shift goes unfilled

The workforce shortage doesn't cancel the need. It just leaves the hours uncovered.



STEP 2

The family absorbs the hours

Someone has to be there. It becomes you, because there is no one else on the schedule.



STEP 3

Absorption becomes the plan

Agencies start treating your unpaid coverage as a permanent line item instead of a gap to fix.

The unwritten job description

Overnight coverage	Supervision and safety checks through the night
Behavior support	De-escalation and redirection without training pay
Medical coordination	Appointments, medication logs, insurance calls
Transportation	Every ride a paid driver used to cover
Appointment advocacy	Sitting in rooms fighting for services, unpaid, on your day off

A SHIFT THAT NEVER ENDED

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Cheryl's agency lost its third overnight DSP in a year. The agency called to say the shift was "temporarily uncovered." Eighteen months later, Cheryl was still the overnight shift, still working her day job, and the word temporarily had quietly disappeared from every conversation.

THE GAP WAS NEVER FILLED. IT WAS JUST RENAMED AS NORMAL.

What matters, at a glance

Sleep debt

Overnight supervision that used to be a staffed shift becomes a parent sleeping with one ear open, indefinitely.

Income you quietly stopped earning

Reduced hours, declined promotions, and jobs left entirely, so someone is always available to cover the gap.

Your own health, deferred

Physical strain from lifting and behavior support, skipped physicals, and stress that shows up as a body problem two years later.

Boundaries you never learned to set

No one trained you to say "that shift is not mine" because no one ever officially assigned it to you either.

The job description that doesn't exist

No hire letter, no wage, no job description. Just a role you filled because it was empty.

Isolation from your own life

Friendships, hobbies, and rest all shrink to fit around a coverage gap that was never supposed to be permanent.

BRING THESE · CHECK AS YOU GO

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| ☐ A dated hour log of absorbed DSP shifts | ☐ A market-rate wage comparison for those hours |
| ☐ A written respite authorization request | ☐ A paid family caregiver program screening request |
| ☐ One written boundary you intend to hold | |

YOUR MOVE

When the uncovered shift has quietly become your permanent job, here is how you push back

- 1 Log every absorbed hour, dated, for one month.
- 2 Total the hours and name the market DSP wage for that time.
- 3 Request formal respite authorization in writing.
- 4 Ask your case manager about paid family caregiver screening.
- 5 Set one boundary you will not cross again this month.
- 6 Bring the log to your next plan review, not just your complaint.

The hours are real work. Naming them as work is what gets them paid or replaced.

RESOURCES NAMED IN THIS POST

caregiving.org · <https://www.caregiving.org>
archrespite.org · <https://archrespite.org>

Informational only. Not legal or medical advice. Verify current program rules before acting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JP

Jim Palasty

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