

Disability and community services

Purpose-led but under pressure

HESTA began the State of the Sector workforce research in 2020 to help the health and community services sector tackle workforce challenges and improve retirement outcomes. At that time, disability and community services workers were driven by a strong sense of purpose and pride in their work, but raised concerns around resourcing, support, and the impacts of system-level reform. We revisited the research in 2022 and again in 2024 to understand how members' views have evolved. These are the 2024 findings.



Australia’s disability and community services sectors have experienced severe staffing shortages, high turnover rates and employee burnout. Wages continue to be a barrier to attracting and retaining employees, and the pay increase for aged care workers is enticing workers to leave the disability sector for aged care.¹

Despite this, disability and community services workers continue to lead with purpose. Job pride and personal reward remain high, with both sectors consistently outperforming others across core industry engagement measures.

This commitment to care is a defining strength. Employees speak to the deep meaning they find in their roles, the impact they make, and the values that guide their work. It’s this strong foundation that has carried the workforce through years of disruption.

But signs of strain are emerging. In 2024, workers, particularly in disability services, are voicing growing concern around resourcing, burnout and the pressure of operating within complex systems like the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Many feel they are being asked to do more with less, and worry that client needs are being overshadowed by business priorities.²

Employers now have a chance to act. With visible support, strong leadership and smarter systems, organisations can protect the pride and connection that make this workforce so vital and help it thrive into the future.

Key insights

Perception of employers is positive in community services, while disability services shows early signs of strain.

Appreciation

Just over half of employees in both sectors feel their work is appreciated by their main employer.

51%

of disability services employees.

54%

of community services employees.

Employee sentiment

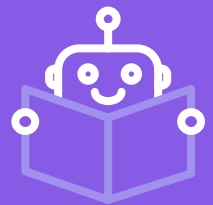
56% of disability services workers and 62% of community services workers agree that their main employer acts honestly and ethically.



Community services have the strongest employer integrity sentiment across the health and community services sector.

Technology adoption

In both sectors, around half of employees who were introduced to new technology in the 12 months prior to the survey felt adequately prepared to use it.



Disability services workers, however, report less employer support during implementation.

Fulfilment

Employees remain deeply connected to the purpose of their work, with strong levels of pride and enjoyment across both sectors.

	Industry enjoyment*	Industry pride†	Employer Net Promoter Score^
Disability services	70%	78%	+2 (-1 point from 2022)
Community services	68%	77%	+7 (+7 points from 2022)

Experience

Emotional fatigue is rising, particularly in disability services. Despite the purpose-led nature of the work, resourcing and system constraints are a growing concern.

Role dissatisfaction



Under-resourcing, stress and salary are the top three pain points in both sectors.

Role satisfaction



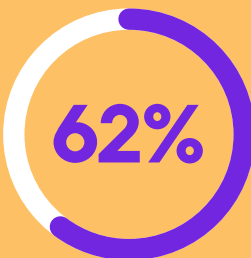
Strong relationships with clients and colleagues are key across both sectors.

A sense of personal reward is the main driver of role enjoyment in both sectors.

Disability services employees



Community services employees



Culture

Supportive relationships and belonging remain a hallmark, though workplace energy has declined since 2022.

Energy

Both sectors report declining energy levels. Declining energy levels combined with under-resourcing and workplace stress can lead to burnout.

Disability services employees

41%

Feel energised in the workplace (-8% since 2022).

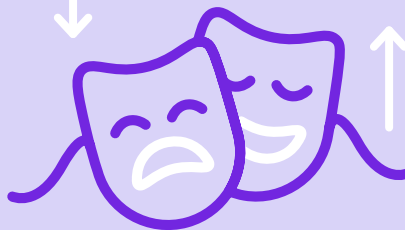
Community services employees

37%

Feel energised in the workplace (-5% since 2022).

Positivity and motivation

Since 2022, disability services employees have reported a decline in feeling positive about themselves (-3%) and in motivation to go above and beyond in their roles (-2%).



In contrast, community services employees are feeling more positive (+3%) and more motivated (+3%).



Source: HESTA workforce research 2024; Disability services sample size n=452, Community services sample size n=533. The statistics presented are based on responses from participants in the 2024 study and are not representative of the entire population.

¹ State of the Disability Sector Report 2024, National Disability Services 2024

² HESTA workforce research 2024; Disability services sample size n=452; Community services sample size n=533

** Such as new software or generative AI

* Score of 8-10 on a 0-10 point scale in response to “How enjoyable do you find working in the industry you currently or typically work in?”

† Score of 8-10 on a 0-10 point scale in response to “How much do you agree or disagree with the statement: I am proud to work in my industry?”

^ Likelihood to recommend their main employer to a family member or friend as a place to work.

What this means for the sector

Disability and community services professionals continue to bring deep commitment and compassion to their work. But many are now feeling the strain of trying to deliver care within increasingly constrained systems. Funding pressures, including under the NDIS are raising real concerns about job security, service quality, and the ability to truly meet client needs. Some workers fear a return to institutional-style care models, where vulnerable individuals risk being overlooked in favour of business efficiency.

Despite these challenges, the sector's greatest strengths remain its people: their integrity, connection, and unwavering belief in the work they do. The opportunity for employers is to protect this purpose by investing in real, visible support. That means listening to frontline teams, backing them with the right tools and systems, and actively supporting their wellbeing.

This is not just about retention. It's about sustaining the heart of care.

About the HESTA Workforce Research

This report draws on insights from State of the Sector: COVID & Beyond – a foundational research series that began with two survey waves in May 2019 and July 2020. It is further informed by national workforce research conducted in November 2022 (~3,400 participants, including ~370 disability services workers and ~440 community services workers) and November 2024 (~4,200 participants, including ~450 disability services workers and ~530 community services workers). All results are weighted to reflect the HESTA member base across each sector.



Although
[we/I work at] a
massive company,
it still feels like
a small family.”

| HESTA |

Four actions you can take

1

**Build visible support systems
that prioritise mental and
emotional wellbeing.**

2

**Strengthen leadership
visibility and transparency
at all levels.**

3

**Champion client-centred
care by reducing systemic
red tape.**

4

**Recognise and reward the
emotional labour at the
heart of this work.**

With more than a million members beside us, we know what matters to them.

Access workforce reports, support tools and educational resources for you and your employees today or email yourindustryfund@hesta.com.au



**Access support
and resources**