

Supporting the Homeless Services Workforce

Although the fundamental solution to end homelessness is housing, securing and stabilizing housing will take more than just rent payments. Doing the work to end homelessness requires staffing in a broad range of roles, including housing navigators, case managers, emergency shelter staff, outreach workers and more. However, due to funding constraints, Continuums of Care and non-profit services providers are finding it difficult to recruit and maintain staff. This results in increased burnout of existing staff, high levels of turnover, and **serious capacity issues** that inhibit a program's ability to be effective.

Rental costs are adjusted from year to year through fair market rents, but no such cost-of-living adjustment exists for staffing costs paid for in the supportive services line item of the Continuum of Care Program, for example. **Many homeless services staff experience homelessness, or are at risk of homelessness themselves, because they cannot afford basic living expenses.**

A 2021 study by Dennis P. Culhane and Seongho An found that the average salary of all employees working in permanent and temporary housing programs was \$30,189 – which means that many in the homelessness sector earn far below the U.S. median household income of \$70,784, and live in (or close to) poverty. Additional research suggests that **low wages can be one of the key reasons that homeless service employees leave their organizations** (or the sector completely), rendering homelessness programs unable to house people effectively.

With low wages contributing to employee turnover, many organizations struggle to stay afloat. The National Council of Nonprofits conducted a country-wide survey where it found that 26 percent of participating non-profits had 20-29 percent vacancy rates, with human service jobs constituting most openings. Low wages were one of the biggest reasons for low retention and high turnover rates, along with the inability to find childcare. Within an industry that can demand long hours and emotionally and mentally taxing labor, employees (like their clients) must contend with skyrocketing rents that threaten their housing stability and general well-being.

Additionally, high health risks among front line workers and low wages in the field have racial equity implications. Changes in pay will have a greater impact among those earning the least, typically frontline staff. The most recent Race to Lead Survey for the nation's non-profits suggests people of color are more likely to be represented among frontline staff than to be senior managers.

Congress should support changes in the FY2024 T-HUD Appropriations bill requiring HUD to improve funding for renewing existing projects to not only cover increases in rent, but also cost-of-living income adjustments for frontline staff.

Support a Change to a Biennial Continuum of Care (CoC) Program Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)

Congress is urged to support the Administration's FY2024 budget request, which would allow HUD to hold a CoC Program competition every other year instead of annually, as currently required. As the Administration correctly noted: "Responding to an annual (competition) requires CoCs to spend many hours implementing a local competition process and additional time to complete the application." Further, the unpredictability of when the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) will be released or when awards will be funded creates additional strain and uncertainty on local homeless service providers.

At the local level, moving to a biennial NOFO would offer CoCs more time to conduct strategic planning, performance improvement, training, and more. Such a change would not only alleviate burden on local CoCs and homeless service providers, it would also free up additional capacity of HUD program staff in the Office of Special Needs Assistance Programs. This would provide greater opportunity to provide oversight, offer timely guidance, and more.

