

Working with Unsheltered People: Findings from the Alliance's Workforce Survey



Written By: Joy Moses, Vice President of Research and Evidence
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During the summer of 2023, the Alliance surveyed the nation's homeless services workforce. The online questions were answered by 5,044 people in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The results highlighted mission-driven workers in challenging settings who were making personal sacrifices rooted in limited salaries. In light of the unsheltered homelessness crisis (record-high numbers of people are currently living in these situations), this brief will spotlight the subset of workers most focused on the population—street outreach and drop-in center workers.

693 survey respondents (14 percent of the total) self-identified as working in this area. Their responses indicated:

Newness to the Profession. Sixty percent of these professionals reported working in homelessness for five years or less. The same is true for only 51 percent of all other workers.

Increased Stress About Clients. Street outreach and drop-in center workers were more likely to be stressed about clients. Possible explanations include: 1) they may have more frequent interactions with people in greater states of crisis, and 2) they may have more limited resources to help those in need.

Increased Financial Distress. On a subset of questions, workers serving people living unsheltered were more likely to show signs of financial distress. Full-time workers reported their salaries indicated lower wages than all other workers.

Street Outreach and Drop-in Center Work: What It Takes

Pathways into unsheltered homelessness are often shaped by painful circumstances. One study found nearly half (46 percent) of unsheltered people report abuse and/or trauma as the cause of their current episode of homelessness. Sleeping outdoors (and in unstable situations) only adds more stressors to a person's life.

When compared to their sheltered peers, those living unsheltered tend to experience greater challenges. They report being homeless for longer periods of time while also reporting far more physical and mental health conditions. Research suggests that those reached by outreach workers have more severe symptoms and are more difficult to engage in services.



Providing Services to Unsheltered People

People living unsheltered may come into **drop-in centers**, which are central locations where people can connect to all types of aid such as housing assistance, health resources, food, employment assistance, and hygiene services (e.g., showers). **Street outreach workers** similarly aim to connect people with assistance, but they are not typically in one set location—essentially, they travel across neighborhoods looking for individuals who may (or may not) be seeking help.

Serving people with complex needs requires multiple skills. According to the literature, delivering high-quality street outreach services

requires an ability to build relationships and trust with people who often distrust service providers; training and proficiency with evidence-based practices (e.g., trauma-informed care and motivational interviewing); crisis management skills; cultural competency; capacity to implement nonjudgmental and person-centered approaches; an ability to navigate multiple social services systems; data entry skills; teamwork; flexibility; empathy; commitment; and persistence, amongst other skills and attributes.

Not everyone can do this work. And those with identified talents should be retained for as long as possible.

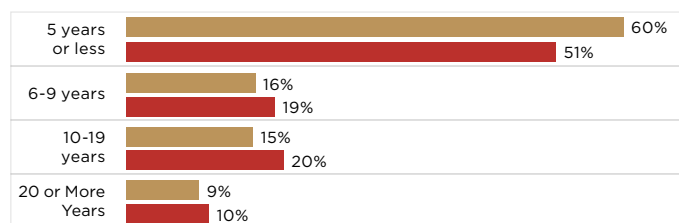
Finding #1: Newness to the Profession

Despite the great needs of the population and the demands of the job, the Alliance survey found that many street outreach and drop-in center workers are new to the profession. **Sixty percent** had been working in homeless services for five years or less. This number stands in contrast to all other homeless services workers—only **51 percent** reported being in this limited-tenure category.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, very few seasoned professionals were working for street outreach programs and drop-in centers. Only **9 percent** of survey respondent group members had 20 or more years of experience in homeless services.

Years of Service

(60% of Street Outreach and Drop-In Center Workers Have 5 Years of Experience or Less)



Groups

- Street Outreach / Drop-In Center
- All Other Workers

Implications

Workforce Stability Difficulties. An organization with mostly newer staff suggests frequent turnover and, therefore, constant shifts in who is working with clients. Indeed, 68 percent of street outreach and drop-in center workers said that their workplaces experience a lot of turnover. For programs, building relationships and trust with clients is likely harder when those clients must frequently meet (and become acquainted with) new faces. Constant turnover and new staff mean that staff are constantly learning and re-learning their jobs, which distracts from the true focus of homeless services: getting unsheltered people into housing.

Increased Demand for Training. Newer workers and frequent turnover point to a need for high-quality training that is broadly and regularly available. This pool of workers just beginning their careers in homelessness also offers an opportunity for current organizational and regional leaders to identify and support future leaders of the profession. Current leaders can shape training, mentorship, and other professional development opportunities with that goal in mind.

Need for Greater Retention. Street outreach and drop-in center employers require enhanced supports to promote employee retention. Such efforts would ensure that more clients are consistently served by familiar workers, while also increasing the pool of employees who can offer training and mentorship rooted in real world work experience.

Finding #2: Increased Stress about Clients

On multiple survey questions, street outreach and drop-in center staff were more likely than other homeless services workers to be stressed about their clients. An overwhelming majority were concerned about having limited resources to serve people—those surveyed expressed frustrations about this stress (**80 percent**) and indicated it was affecting their ability to do their jobs well (**76 percent**). More generally, workers reaching unsheltered people were also more likely to directly state that they were experiencing “stress/worry about the well-being of clients.”

Although concerns about clients are common within the profession, there are a few possible explanations for why this subset of workers were more likely to share such responses:

Serving Clients with More Complex Challenges. As noted above, research indicates people living unsheltered report more physical and mental health conditions than their sheltered counterparts. Having clients with greater challenges may equate to a greater likelihood of workplace stress.

Working within a Limited Ability to Help. Given the nature of their jobs, temporary and permanent housing providers offer a subset of people an important resource—a bed (or a form of housing). Street outreach and drop-in center staff are less able to do the same, which may lead to increased worry about where clients will sleep or receive needed resources.

Even successfully referring people to a shelter may be difficult—78 percent of Continuums of Care have a shortage of shelter beds on a given night¹. And, for some clients, there may be barriers (e.g., exclusionary program rules) to accessing the beds that are available.

Being unable to provide high-need unsheltered people with shelter (and other resources) is presumably stressful.

More Stressed About Ability to Serve Clients

Experiences	Street Outreach and Drop-In Centers	All Other Workers
Frustration because I can't give more people housing and services	80%	67%
Need more resources for clients to do my job well	76%	68%
Stress/worry about the well-being of clients	69%	59%

Implications

This finding points to one rather straightforward implication: in order to do their jobs well, street outreach and drop-in center staffers overwhelmingly said they need more resources for clients. Policymakers (at all levels of government) should provide these resources—including a far greater number of housing opportunities for people living unsheltered.

Further, street outreach and drop-in center workers should receive workplace supports catered to the unique challenges associated with their roles. Models for managing the stresses of the job could include forms of training, peer support networks, and/or mentoring. Organizations should share promising practices with their partners, and such practices should also be tested and evaluated for their effectiveness.

1 This data point is based on a comparison between each Continuum of Care's Point-in-Time Count and Housing Inventory Counts for 2023.

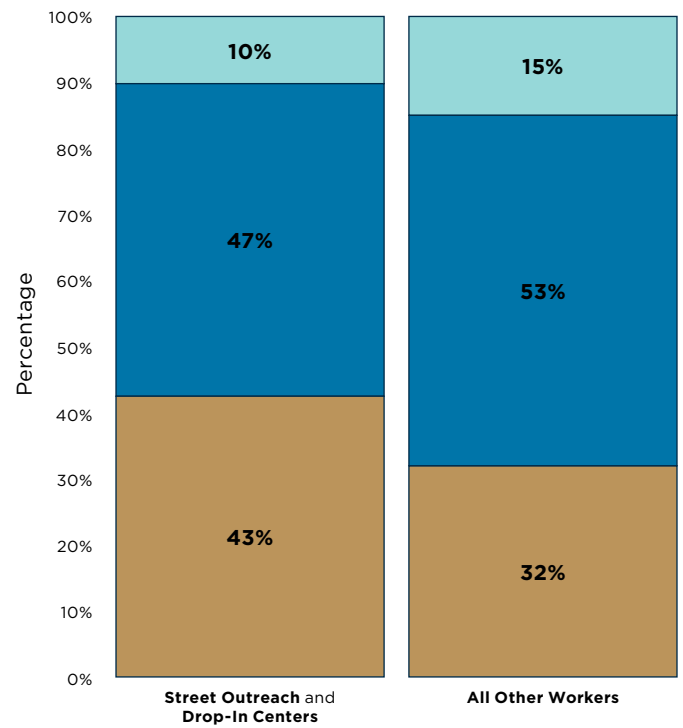
Finding #3: Increased Financial Distress

Compared to others working in homelessness who completed the Alliance’s survey, street outreach and drop-in center workers were more likely to show signs of financial distress. Indeed, they reported having lower salaries—**62 percent** were earning \$50,000 or less (compared to **53 percent** of all other workers). In examining pay disparities, the Alliance’s analysis explored connections to race and ethnicity. Those who work mainly with unsheltered people were somewhat more likely to be non-white, with 43 percent falling into this category, compared to their 40 percent representation amongst all other homeless services workers².

Additionally, **43 percent** said their salaries were not enough to meet their basic needs, a number that is **9 points** higher than the rest of the homeless services workforce. Only a small slice (**10 percent**) said that they were making enough money to live well (i.e., having their basic needs and many wants covered).

Unfortunately, street outreach and drop-in center employees were also slightly more likely to say they were making ends meet through methods indicative of hardship and harm to their overall financial well-being. For example, higher percentages of these workers borrowed money, skipped bill payments, or relied on food pantries and other charities to make ends meet. Street outreach and drop-in center employees were also more apt to report poverty indicators such as homelessness and hunger.

Basic Needs



Responses

- Enough to allow me to live well (basic needs + many wants)
- Just enough for my basic needs
- Not enough for my basic needs

Over the Last Year, I have experienced...

Poverty Indicators Rooted in Salary	Street Outreach and Drop-In Centers	All Other Workers
Significant Stress	70%	62%
Hunger	16%	10%
A Loss of Housing	7%	4%
Homelessness	5%	3%
None of the Above	29%	35%

The Following Allow Me to Make Ends Meet...

Responses	Street Outreach and Drop-In Centers	All Other Workers
Borrowing money from family/friends	22%	16%
Doing without things I need	36%	29%
Relying on credit cards to help pay bills	34%	32%
Relying on food pantries or other charities	17%	11%
Skipping some bill payments	29%	22%

2 Hispanics/Latinos, American Indians/Alaska Natives/Indigenous, and multi-racial individuals are the only subgroups that had representations within street outreach and drop-in center programs that exceeded their representations among all other workers. Notably, these results could be tied to the survey’s methodology—workers of color may have been less likely to learn about the survey or respond. Also, national-level data may not suitably reflect the workforces of individual communities.

Implications

The Alliance's survey and previous housing wage gap analysis (examining the difference between what homeless services workers make and how much it costs to afford housing) suggest that all sectors of the homeless services workforce should be earning more money. However, this finding points to a need to further examine any existing disparities between the wages of street outreach and drop-in center workers, and their other homeless services colleagues.

Salary disparities may partially be explained by differences in the average years of experience or average educational attainment associated with the varying sectors of homeless services. However, both the field and individual communities should revisit and reevaluate their values to determine if any salary disparities continue to be appropriate. Those considerations

should include the degree to which people with lived experience of homelessness hold these jobs and how their knowledge is valued and incorporated into service delivery.

A body of research indicates that people with lived experience help clients reach various goals, including housing stability, in ways that people without lived experience may not be able to. Such findings point to a need to reconsider traditional characteristics (e.g., education and years of work experience) used to determine salary levels, so as to include lived experience of homelessness as a factor that boosts worker income.

Finally, future policies designed to improve the salaries of the workforce as a whole should also consider how to reduce or eliminate salary disparities among those serving unsheltered populations.

CONCLUSION

Each day, street outreach and drop-in center workers connect with clients who are too often ignored by most people in the community, and who are managing complex health challenges and trauma. Doing this work requires skills as well as specific personal qualities (e.g., compassion, empathy, and patience). When skilled workers are able to build relationships and trust with clients, they can play a critical role in connecting them to housing and services. However, for workers reaching people living unsheltered, their skills and the roles they play in ending homelessness are currently undervalued. Taking steps to change the status quo will improve client services and help in ending unsheltered homelessness.

The homeless services workforce is in crisis. The Alliance survey revealed significant needs tied to salaries and work environments: it's clear that there are some meaningful differences between employees reaching unsheltered populations (street outreach and drop-in center workers) and others in the field. CoCs and programs should work to implement specialized and targeted training, retention initiatives, supports to manage workplace stress, and reevaluations of pay disparities are warranted. Importantly, policymakers at all levels of government should ensure that CoCs and program have both the resources they need to support the workforce and the resources they need to fully meet the needs of clients.

