

Working in Homeless Services: A Survey of the Field



Written By: Joy Moses, Vice President of Research and Evidence
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Anecdotal stories about challenges facing the homeless services workforce are commonplace.

Those who know people in the field have surely heard about the stresses of serving people with great needs and trying to achieve goals within organizations with limited resources. These stories suggest a need to be concerned about workers, but also for the well-being of people experiencing homelessness and the nation's efforts to end homelessness.

Earlier this year, the National Alliance to End Homelessness set out to better understand and document workforce challenges. As a part of these efforts, the Alliance conducted a nationwide survey of homeless services employees, learning about:

1. **A Mission-Driven Workforce.** Much of the workforce cites altruistic reasons for choosing and liking their profession. In total, 87 percent valued doing worthwhile work.
2. **Staffing Challenges.** Among respondents, 74 percent said that their agencies/organizations were understaffed, while 71 percent reported that their agencies/organizations experienced high employee turnover.
3. **Overwhelming Work Environments.** Homeless services personnel experience significant stress rooted in not being able to help enough people (69 percent). They also feel overworked (46 percent).
4. **Personal Sacrifices.** The workforce is overwhelmingly impacted by low salaries, leading to financial difficulties: they worry about paying for wants like vacations (54 percent) but also needs such as housing (44 percent).
5. **Harms to Service Delivery.** Employees indicate that workforce challenges translate into cutbacks in services and clients not fully getting the help they need.

The homeless services workforce should be appreciated for their mission-driven dedication to their work. However, they also desperately need additional resources, and other policy and practice supports, to ensure its continued work can meet the needs of all people experiencing homelessness.

Methodology

The Alliance created an online survey in Google Forms. It was distributed to the homeless services workforce via the organization's newsletter, social media, and an announcement at its national conference in July 2023. Some recipients of the survey link also shared it with their networks. The survey was conducted between July 17, 2023 and September 15, 2023.

The responses were analyzed by Alliance staff. Most respondents completed the survey in full. No question had a response rate below 91 percent. Although the vast majority of respondents were salaried employees, some received stipends or were part-time or volunteer workers. The reported data on salaries solely pertains to salaried employees working at least 35 hours per week.

Who Responded?

In total, 5,044 people responded to the survey.

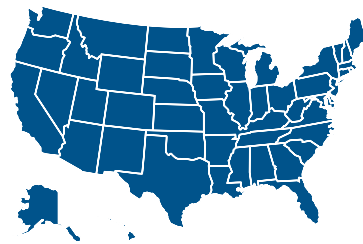
Location. Survey takers worked in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia. Western and southern states were highly represented in the survey. However, these regions have the largest populations of people experiencing homelessness — thus, they may simply have more workers. Workers in northeast states may be slightly underrepresented, since those states are home to 16 percent of respondents but 21 percent of people experiencing homelessness.

Since the majority of the homeless population lives in urban areas, it was unsurprising that most (75 percent) of the respondents served these types of communities.

Survey Respondent Demographics. Survey participants were asked a series of demographic questions. Ideally, the Alliance would be able to compare its respondents to a comprehensive census of the homelessness workforce. However, such data does not exist — therefore, the Alliance cannot determine the extent to which these survey takers are representative of all the people doing this work.

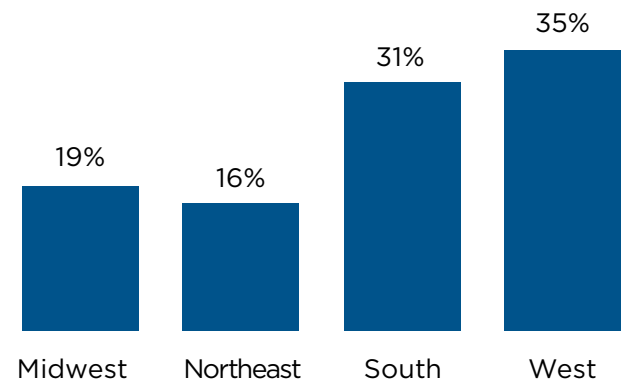
The respondents were overwhelmingly women (77 percent), matching anecdotal information from the field. The Alliance’s interactions with the field have suggested a workforce that is significantly female.

Where Respondents Work

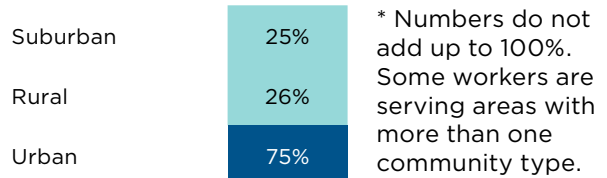


All 50 States and the District of Columbia.

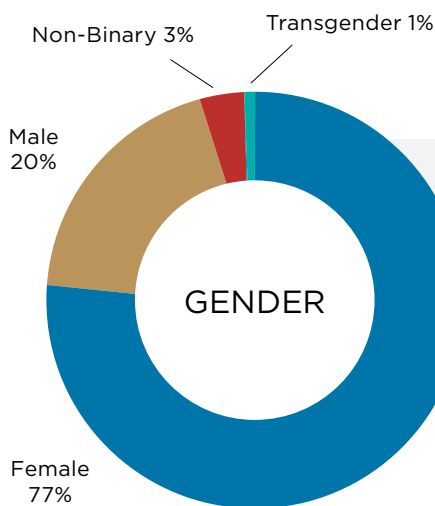
Region of the Country



Community Type



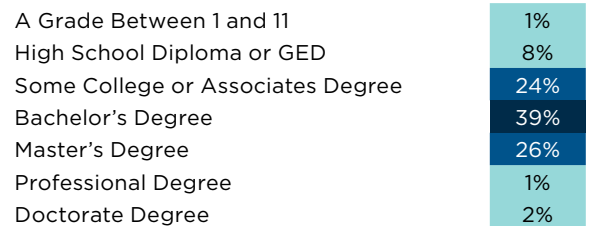
Survey Respondent Demographics



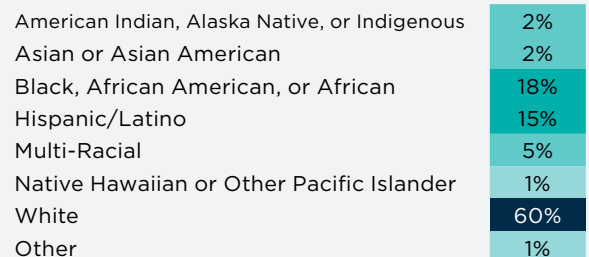
* Some respondents identified with more than one gender category (eg, “transgender” and “female”). Thus, the population shares add up to a little more than 100 percent.

* This chart merges the responses related to race and ethnicity. Some Hispanics/Latinos also identified with a specific racial group such as “white”. Thus, the population shares add up to more than 100 percent.

Educational Attainment



Race/Ethnicity

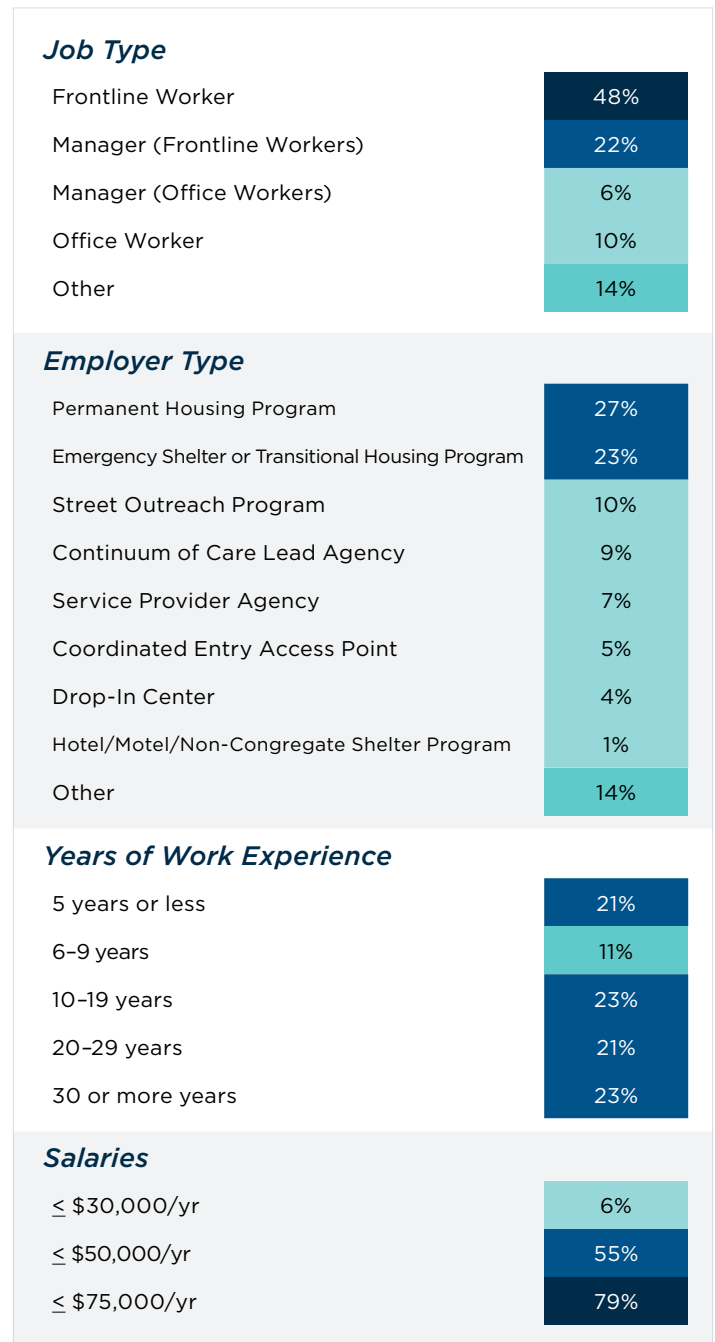


Additionally, the respondents were racially and ethnically diverse. Group representation in the survey resembled overall [Census population data](#) for the United States. Notably, however, those in the Black, African American, or African group were overrepresented in the survey (18 percent of respondents) compared to their share of the general population (12 percent). It is possible that this group is simply overrepresented within the homelessness workforce — i.e., group members may be more likely than others to choose this type of work. Importantly, Black people are overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness, representing 37 percent of the homeless population in 2022. This seismic impact of the issue on Black people may be drawing more group members to the profession. However, if the Alliance’s respondents are representative (i.e., Black people make up 18 percent of the workforce), there may be a disproportionality of fewer Black people working in homelessness — the expectation might be that group workforce numbers would also be around 37 percent.

Finally, the sample of survey respondents was overwhelmingly educated — 92 percent had at least some college training, while 68 percent had a bachelor’s degree or higher. Without the benefit of being able to compare these numbers to a full census of the workforce, the Alliance must acknowledge the possibility that the survey simply failed to significantly reach non-college-educated people. Such workers likely have the lowest pay and the most underheard voices.

Work-Related Characteristics. Fifty-five percent of full-time workers who responded to the survey earned less than \$55,000 per year, putting them at severe risk of being unable to afford their own housing. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, on average, a United States worker must earn \$49,234 to afford a one-bedroom apartment and \$59,446 for a two-bedroom unit. The Alliance previously estimated a [\\$4.8 billion deficit](#) between current homeless service sector salaries and what is needed to bring workers’ pay up to adequate amounts that would allow them to comfortably afford housing.

In addition to being at risk of not being able to afford housing, respondents were overwhelmingly frontline workers¹ or supervisors/managers of frontline workers (70 percent). Most worked within permanent housing (27 percent) or temporary housing programs (24 percent). But this group is employed in other capacities, such as by Continuum of Care (CoC) agencies, and have diverse levels of experience. Some were just starting their careers while others have been in the field for decades.



1 “Frontline worker” was defined as spending at least 25 percent of work time with clients who are currently or formerly homeless.

Why Do People Work in the Homelessness Field?

Altruism and a sense of calling play a significant role in drawing people into, and staying in, these professions. When given the opportunity to describe their reasons for working in the homelessness field, multiple people spoke about their religious faith. Some noted a desire to help: “No one else was stepping up to do the necessary work.” AmeriCorps and Peace Corps were mentioned as gateways into service. Respondents also valued opportunities to develop strong relationships. The survey specifically asked about relationships with clients and co-workers, but respondents also mentioned valued the opportunity to develop positive relationships with supervisors, board members, and collaborating organizations.

Although unprompted, at least 182 respondents volunteered that they (or a loved one) had lived experience of homelessness and/or related challenges with mental health and addiction. They felt drawn to helping others in similar circumstances. As one person said, “I got the

help I needed as a youth staying in shelter. There were a lot of challenges, but it was one of the few places I remember feeling like I could breathe. I want to create that sense of safety for others.”

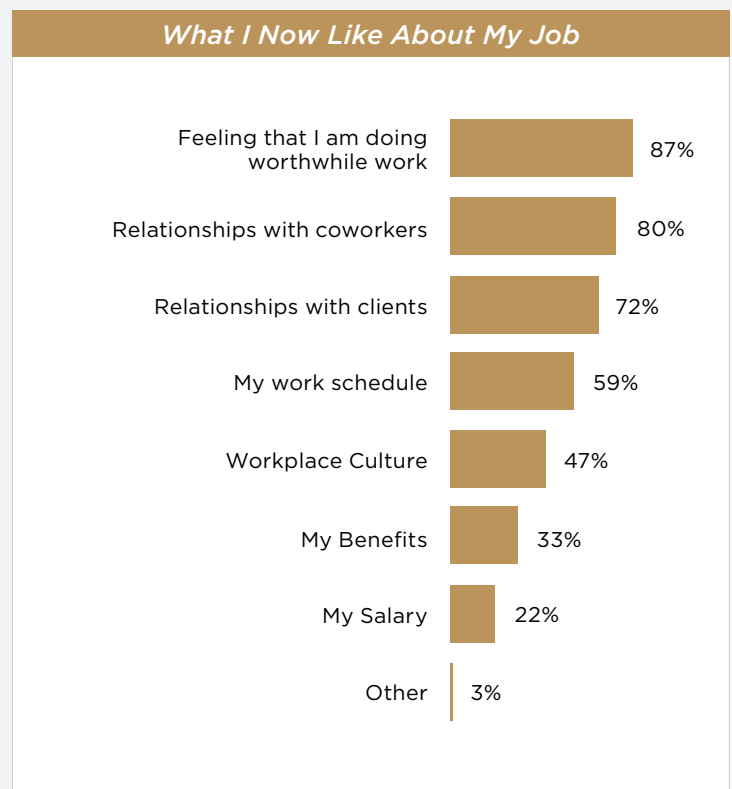
A segment of people connected to their profession via previous work or concern about specific subpopulations. These include veterans, human trafficking survivors, and children and youth.

Finally, several respondents shared some very practical reasons for engaging in this work: for example, being retired but still wanting or needing to work. Others left corporate America to try something new. A slice of survey takers expressed an appreciation for their salary, benefits, work-life balance, and work-from-home opportunities. Some were assigned to homelessness work by agencies that had broader missions. And then there were those who lost employment during the pandemic (or at some other time) and simply needed to pay their bills. Perhaps, some of those falling into this bucket share the sentiments of one survey taker: “Originally [I] began working in homeless services just to have a job but ended up falling in love with the job. I found my calling.”

Reasons for Working in the Homelessness Workforce



The answer options for these two questions were similar but not identical. Please see [the appendix](#) for the exact wording of the questions.



Difficult Work Environments: Insufficient Staffing and High Turnover

The good intentions and sense of purpose expressed by many homeless services professionals often coexist with challenging working conditions. Significant weight falls on their shoulders. Importantly, these circumstances also dramatically impact people experiencing homelessness and the nation's goal of reducing and ending homelessness.

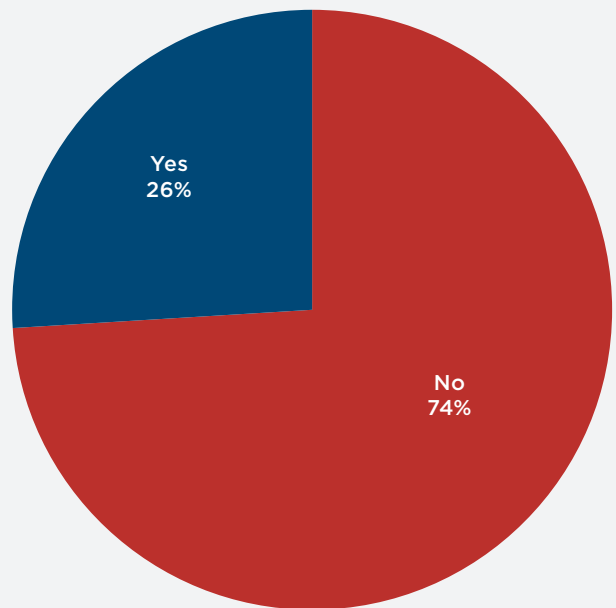
Three out of every four workers indicated that their organizations/agencies were understaffed, not having enough employees to meet important goals such as serving every person in need of help.

Further, far too many workplaces were grappling with high rates of employee turnover — 71 percent of respondents said that this was an issue at their jobs. For employees, the results associated with high turnover included increased stress (90 percent) and overwork (64 percent). They also reported the following impacts:

- **Employee Despondency.** Several people mentioned words like “burnout,” “low morale,” “lack of motivation,” “underappreciated,” “hopelessness,” “disgruntled,” and “apathy.”
- **Threats to Funding.** Multiple people mentioned turnover as a factor preventing the fulfillment of service contracts and grant deliverables, potentially leading to losses of funding.
- **Low-Quality Staffing.** According to one person, “We keep toxic staff due to staffing issues because it’s hard to fill positions.” Another mentioned an overreliance on volunteers who lack commitment (therefore putting more stress on staff).
- **Inefficient Use of Resources.** Some respondents spoke about constantly holding new employee trainings, which costs time and resources. At least one person mentioned resources being wasted on regularly paying existing employees for overtime.

Does your organization/agency have enough employees to meet its goals?

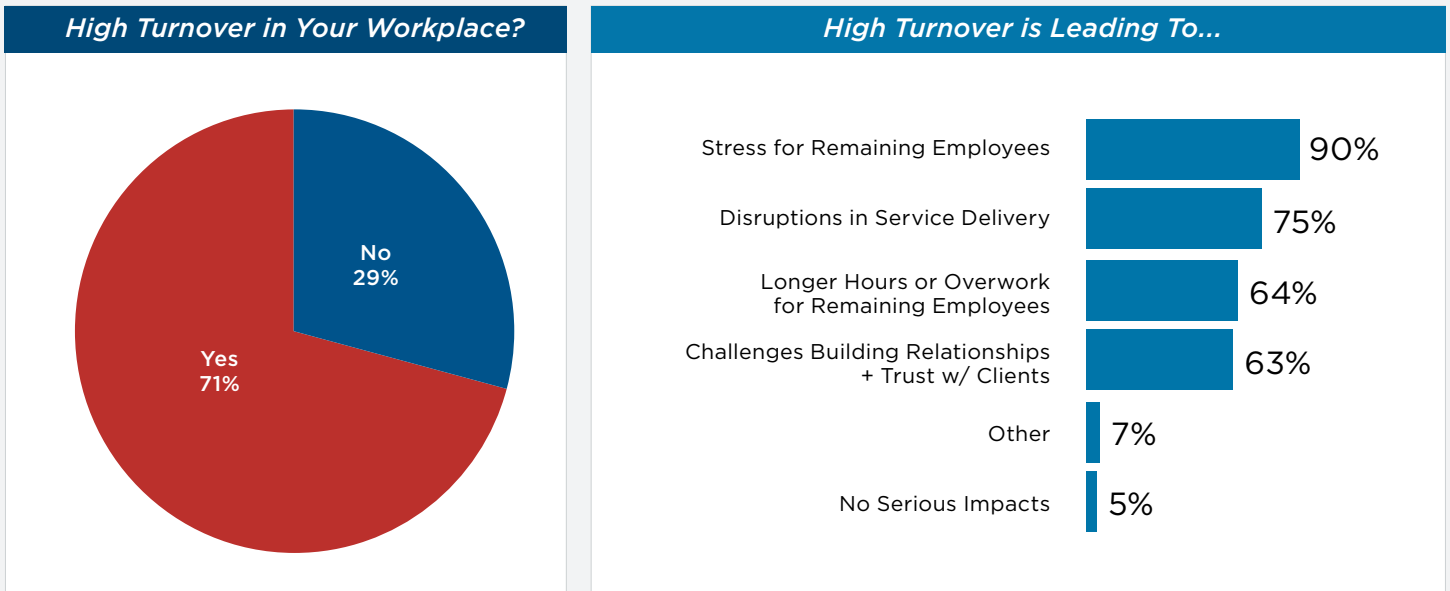
(for example, serving all people who need help or meeting all your administrative requirements)



- **Leadership Challenges.** Employees indicated that it was hard to trust leadership in such environments. Building staff cohesion is difficult. And “leadership can’t make strategic plans because they only think in crisis mode.”
- **Personal Dangers and Sacrifices.** With high turnover and not enough staffing, existing staff are sometimes put in physically dangerous situations. And some indicated not being able to take time off due to staffing challenges (therefore losing earned leave).
- **Organizational/Agency Losses.** With turnover, institutional knowledge is lost. And some respondents reported that their work environments have led to lost trust and respect from partnering agencies, damaging their relationships.

“There is less consistency in service delivery due to insufficient training. Supervisors are typically too busy trying to hire people to train the ones they already have. The newbie is thrown into new challenges without knowing what they need to. There is such a high demand for services but regardless of how busy we are, the client deserves that support person to be competent and well-trained.” — Survey Respondent

High Employee Turnover



Undoubtedly, these various factors impact clients. For example, threats to funding can translate into diminished service offerings, and situations that are dangerous for staff may also be dangerous for clients. Further, the survey revealed issues that have an even more direct connection to clients.

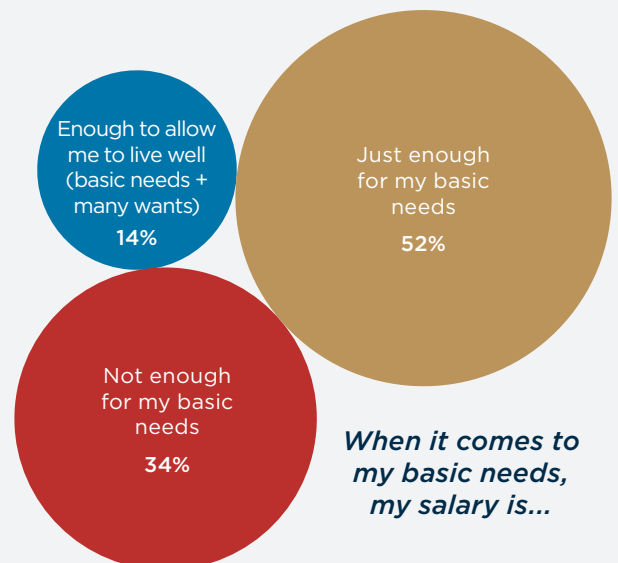
Of those in high turnover environments, 75 percent say that this factor disrupts service delivery, and 63 percent indicate that it hurts their ability to build relationships and trust with clients. In response to questions about high turnover environments, respondents also shared:

- **Realities of Service Disruption.** One person simply said, “Clients [are] kicked out.” Others spoke of service delays, the need to close clinics on days when staffing is short, and an inability to meet all client needs.
- **Crowded Caseloads.** Presumably, crowded caseloads reduce the time and attention available to individual clients.
- **Slowed Housing Progress.** A few respondents mentioned slowed progress in getting people off the streets and in ending homelessness.

Salary-Related Hardships

Human services professionals are often underpaid, often earning less than what their education and experience would suggest, and struggling to afford basics such as housing. Thus, the Alliance asked a series of questions designed to understand how homeless services salaries were impacting people’s lives.

Basic Needs. A portion of respondents did not want to share their salary information. Of those responding (and working at leady 35 hours per week), 55 percent were making under \$50,000 per year. One in three said that their salaries were not enough to meet their basic needs. And, at the opposite end of the spectrum, only 14 percent said that they earned enough to live well (having basic needs and many wants met).

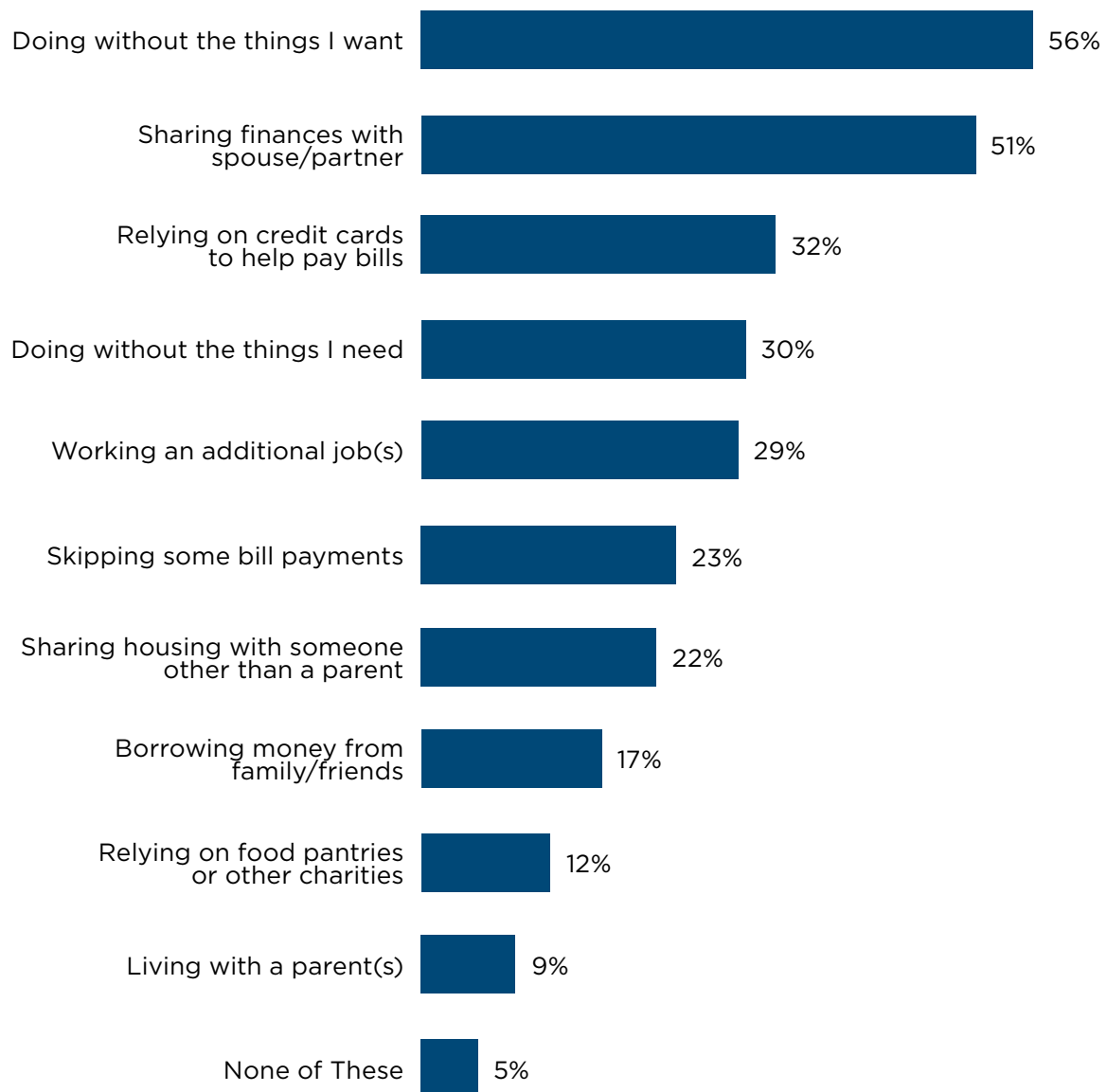


Making Ends Meet. It's clear that homeless services workers are making ends meet (or failing to do so) in a variety of ways. Most were making sacrifices — i.e., 56 percent were doing without things that they want. Beyond that, respondents roughly fell within two camps:

Economic Security from Sources Other Than Work. A number of respondents indicated some level of economic security coming from sources other than their jobs. Chief among them was sharing resources with a spouse/partner (51 percent) or a parent (9 percent). Survey takers wrote in other examples, such as pensions from previous jobs, stock portfolios, real estate holdings (i.e., being a landlord, having paid of their mortgage, or profiting from the sale of property), inheritances, no educational debt, and child support and alimony.

Some of the people in this category may not be living luxuriously, but they have other sources of income that are helping them to make ends meet in ways that are relatively unharmed to their personal well-being.

The Following Allow Me to Make Ends Meet ...

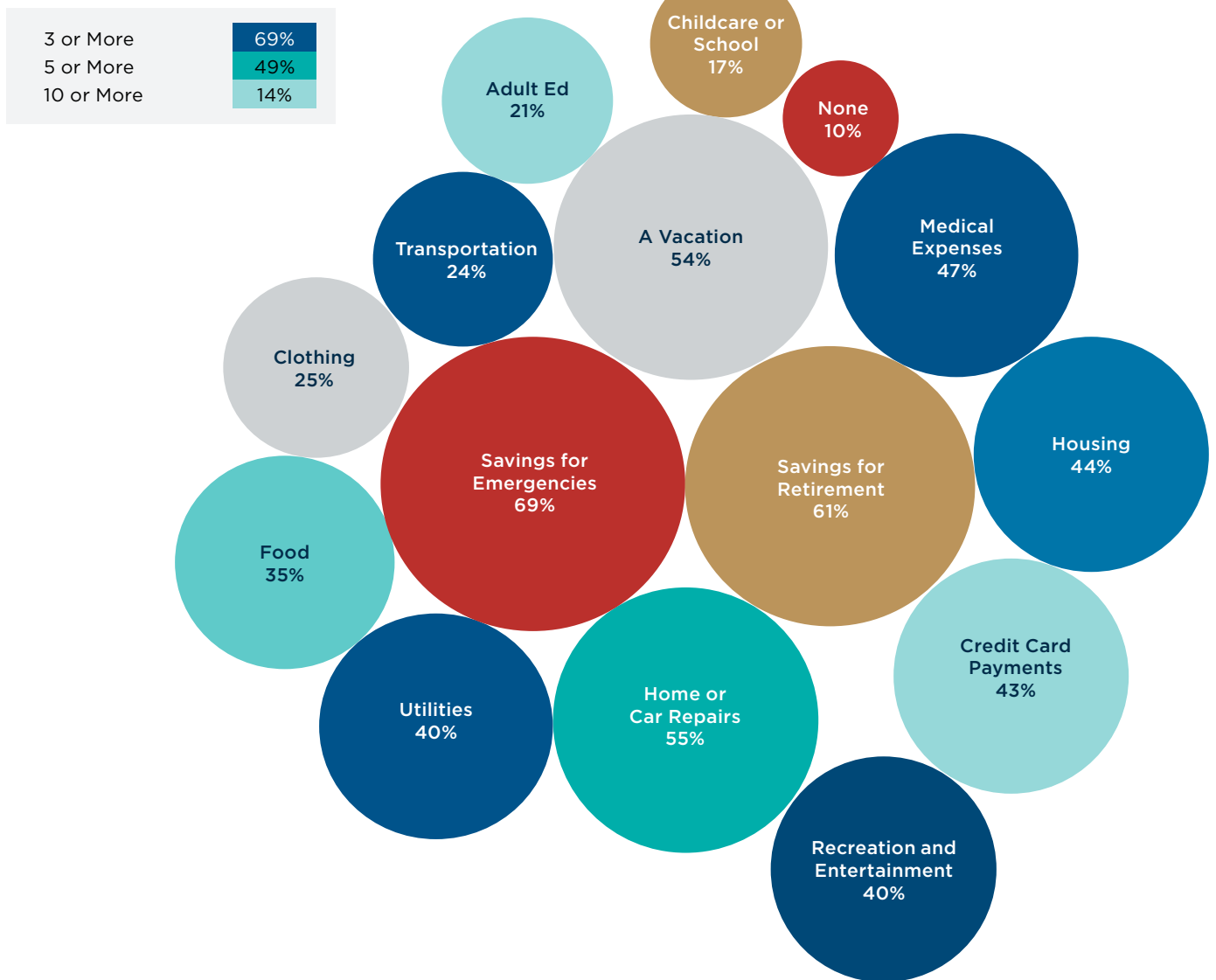


Clearly Struggling Financially. Other respondents mentioned factors that are associated with concerning levels of financial hardship, such as relying on credit cards to pay bills (32 percent) or relying on charities (12 percent). Some of the write-in answers included taking out several personal loans, having teenage children take jobs to help out, donating plasma, skipping meals, and filing for bankruptcy. A few people indicated that they themselves were experiencing homelessness or relying on government programs targeting people living in poverty (e.g., subsidized housing and energy assistance).

Some workers may be spreading themselves thin. Twenty-nine percent of respondents said they work an additional job(s). Others mentioned an at-home business and having multiple “side hustles.”

Finally, survey takers flagged other areas that may prove concerning. First, there were those who mentioned the value of not having to make student loan payments due to COVID relief measures. That relief expired in the fall of 2023, which may have a sizable impact on homeless services workers — a significant number of whom have obtained varying levels of post-secondary education. A second concern is that at least two people indicated that they were making ends meet by not having children — thus, salaries for the field may be impacting significant areas of life like family planning.

Over the Last Year, I've Worried About Paying For...

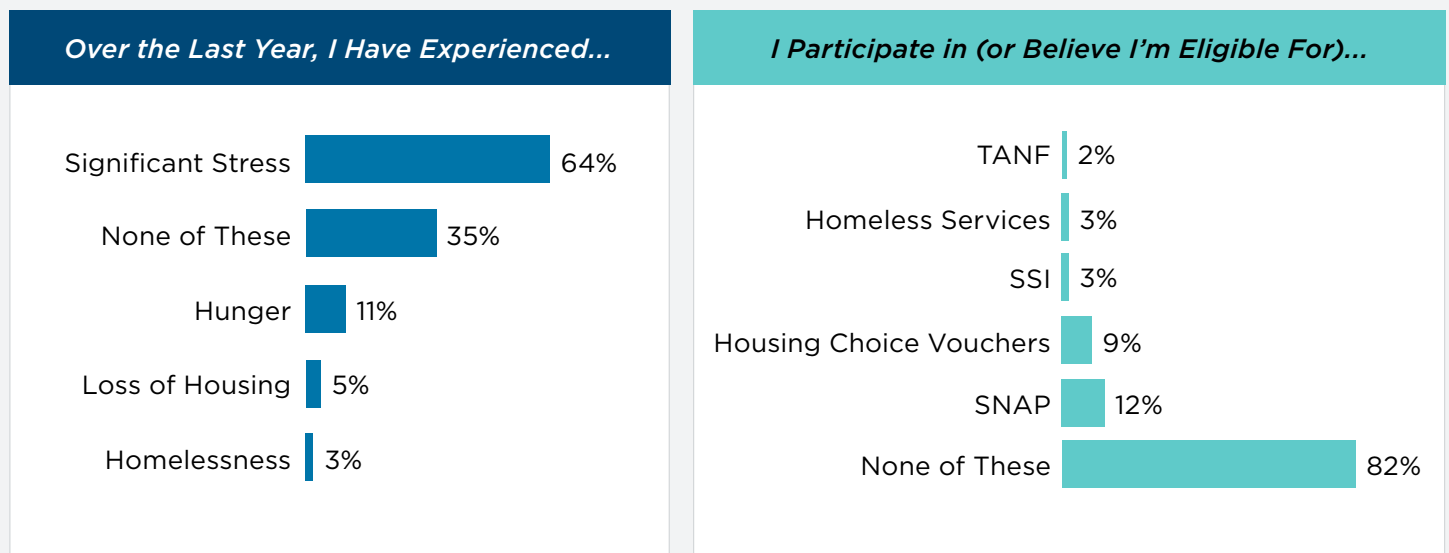


Worries About Paying for Needs and Wants.

The survey dug a little deeper into the types of things workers may be worried about paying for in their efforts to make ends meet. The respondents indicated items that severely threaten their financial security, like savings for emergencies (69 percent). They also flagged challenges that contribute to a happy life, such as vacations (54 percent). Most concerning are their worries about paying for basic necessities like food (35 percent) and utilities (40 percent). Forty-four percent of these employees who are focused on helping others find housing are worried about how they will pay for their own.

Poverty Indicators. Finally, the survey probed whether there were portions of the workforce in the nation’s most dire financial circumstances. Salaries are a source of stress for most workers (64 percent). Much smaller numbers shared signs of other poverty indicators. Notably, some were themselves experiencing homelessness — living in temporary housing programs and cars.

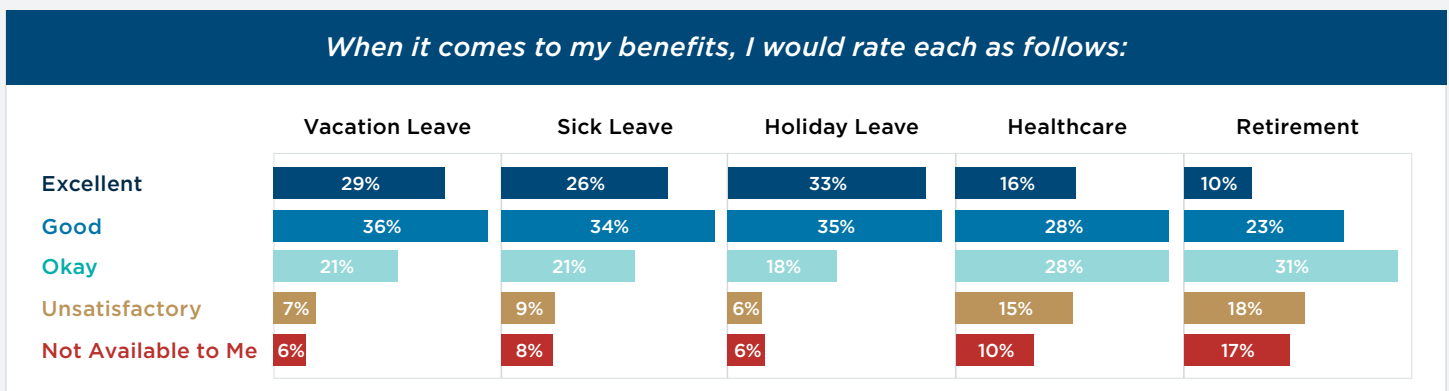
Poverty Indicators Rooted in Current Salary



Benefits

Survey respondents are largely content with their benefits, rating each type as being at least “okay.” Workers are least satisfied with their healthcare and retirement benefits.

Unfortunately, a slice of workers completely lack access to certain offerings. Respondents were least likely to have retirement benefits – 16 percent of all those responding lacked them.



Workplace Challenges

The Alliance asked about other challenges of working in homeless services. Previously expressing altruistic reasons for entering the profession, many respondents identified factors rooted in concerns about the people they serve. The biggest identified workplace challenges were 1) frustrations associated with not being able to help more people (69 percent) and 2) stress and worries about the well-being of clients (60 percent).

Within my current job, I am experiencing the following challenges...

Frustration (Can't give more people housing and services)	69%
Stress/worry about the well-being of clients	60%
Being overworked	46%
Limited rewards or wins tied to work	37%
Overly burdensome paperwork requirements	36%
Limited opportunities to advance in my career	35%
Limited authority to make decisions	25%
Lack of respect for my opinions and contributions	21%
Fears for my safety	13%
None of these	9%
Other	6%
Discrimination or uncomfortable situations (Race/Ethnicity)	6%
Discrimination or uncomfortable situations (Gender)	5%
Discrimination or uncomfortable situations (LGBTQ Identity)	3%

More individualized challenges like being overworked (46 percent) were also highly represented. And, with the opportunity to write in additional challenges, the following also stood out:

Bureaucracy. Several respondents expressed frustration with funding requirements, both those imposed by the federal government and foundations. Respondents also mentioned database concerns (i.e., having to enter the same information into two databases and systems not being user-friendly) and funding reimbursement delays that impact organizational functioning.

Management Challenges. Some respondents indicated concerns about management and office politics. Such concerns occur across fields and generally within the world of work. However, there should be some exploration of how the stresses of this work and high turnover impact homeless services workplaces. These factors pose unique leadership challenges and may affect team building and cohesion.

Other Forms of Discrimination. The survey specifically asked about workplace discrimination based on race, gender, and LGBTQ identity. Workers wrote in experiences with coworkers rooted in age, disability, religion, and lived experience of homelessness. And at least one respondent was concerned about the discrimination faced by his/her clients.

Worries About Other Staff Members. Multiple managers were concerned about their staff being overworked and underpaid. Some people were just generally concerned about the well-being of their peers.

Job Insecurity. A couple of respondents worried about the insecurity of funding streams and, therefore, whether their jobs were at risk.

Public Perceptions. Respondents spoke about NIMBYism² and an absence of support from their communities.

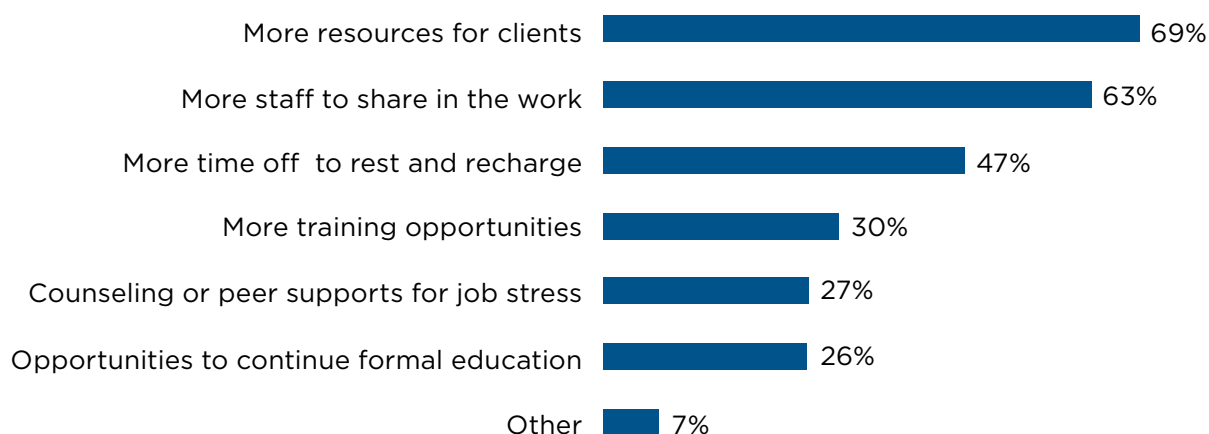
2 “NIMBY” stands for Not in My Back Yard. Merriam-Webster further defines the term as follows: “opposition to the locating of something considered undesirable (such as a prison or incinerator) in one’s neighborhood.”

“... We are also faced with constant misinformation, fear, and anger from community members who don’t understand factors that lead to a person becoming unhoused. Additionally, landlords put up several barriers to being able to obtain or maintain housing for our clients.” — Survey Respondent

Workplace Needs

When asked the question about job-related needs, participants echoed responses similar to others noted elsewhere in the survey. For example, respondents want resources to help them better serve clients, and resources to provide relief for understaffed workplaces. Sizable numbers also requested more training and supports to manage on-the-job stress. Nearly half (47 percent) wanted more time off to rest and recharge. Their comments suggested barriers to using paid time off. As one respondent put it, “[I need the] ability to use the time off I have earned. Work is so busy I now lose PTO each year as there is too much work to do, not enough time.”

Things I Still Need to Do My Job Well



When asked to fill in “other” needs, an overwhelming majority took the opportunity to find various and diverse ways of reiterating the need for better salaries and benefits. Some of these suggestions were quite modest. For example, one survey taker simply wanted a yearly cost of living raise.

Otherwise, individual people offered specific asks that could easily be grouped into categories, including:

Funding stability for their agencies/ organizations (e.g., multi-year funding cycles and unrestricted funding)

Student loan repayment assistance

Executive and other types of mentorship opportunities

Adequate physical workspaces

Mental health leave

Technology upgrades (e.g., non-refurbished computers, work cell phones, paid Zoom accounts, useful software)

New types of staffing (e.g., maintenance workers for workspaces, security guards, and childcare)

Career ladders

Appreciation (e.g., from the community, perks like monthly lunches)

Home buying programs for employees

Remote or at-home work opportunities

Schedule flexibility

Shorter work weeks

“The Trainings that are required for us as staff are hard to get. It is like a feeding frenzy to sign up. Often I can never get any of the required trainings because they are full. It reminds me of trying to get beyonce tickets.” — Survey Respondent

Future Plans

Given some of the stated challenges, one might expect that a number of people would be contemplating an exit from a career in the homeless services field. Indeed, 37 percent of those participating in the Alliance’s survey said they were considering leaving their jobs. By far, the most cited reasons for potentially leaving were limited salary and benefits (73 percent) and on-the-job stress (68 percent). Within the open comment space, many decided to go deeper into issues related to these topics:

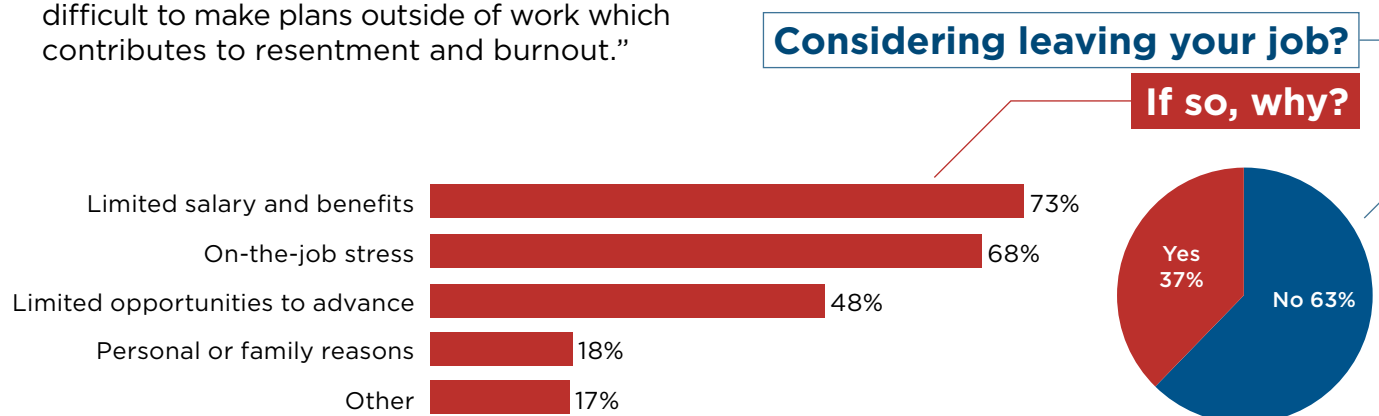
- “I’m tired and though I’m finally in a decent place financially. It took 12 years and I worry what my life will be like when I retire.”
- “Financial need. I’ll lose my house if I can’t make more.”
- “[Stresses of] witnessing participants pass away and seeing participants cycle back through the shelter system after being housed.”
- “I love this work. This work is my calling. But I should be paid fairly. And I get dismissed when I even bring it up. As someone with over 15 years [of experience] . . . my salary should be more than 50k a year. And our board of supervisors and leaders act like this is unreasonable.”
- “With my current job, I co-manage a 24/7 shelter with a team of 23 people. I cannot have a life outside of the job because I am frequently called into work in the shelter even when I am not on-call. It makes it difficult to make plans outside of work which contributes to resentment and burnout.”

Notably, there were some individuals who had seemingly innocuous reasons for contemplating an exit from their job; for instance, it was time for them to retire or they were interested in a new type of work. A segment of respondents were frustrated with working with clients, citing a lack of appreciation and follow-through on their part.

Finally, multiple people simply seemed disillusioned by the lack of resources to solve the problem and the lack of help from the federal government:

- “Burned out. Systems are broken. Tired of fight for change.”
- “Feels like never-ending crisis.”
- “It is depressing to see agency level staff work so hard while the federal policy and budgeting is so weak. It’s hard to know what the solutions could be — but to know that they will never be achieved.”
- “Depression at feeling that no matter what we do in our CoC, the problem cannot be solved without federal intervention that I don’t see coming. The work both at direct service level and administrative level feels Sisyphean.”

Despite all of the above, 63 percent of respondents **were not** considering leaving their jobs.



Moving Forward

The goal of ending homelessness cannot be achieved without changes to the status quo. Workers in the field are daily managing weighty challenges. Professionally, they are trying to serve people within organizations that are understaffed and experiencing high turnover. Personally, they are worried about paying their own bills — including how they will keep themselves housed. Their well-being directly impacts the well-being of clients and the movement to end homelessness.

Implementing Systemic Solutions

Supporting the homeless services workforce is a major policy need that can't be met with one-off or simple solutions. These policy and practice changes cannot happen without major increases in investments. All levels of government and private sector foundations have a role to play in ensuring progress. Significantly, the federal government often packs the biggest punch in terms of its reach and resources. Thus, advocacy directed at Congress and federal administrative agencies is critical. Federal agencies also have a role to play in 1) [reducing administrative burdens](#) on homeless services leaders, so that they can focus more attention on managing workforce challenges, and 2) offering technical assistance and other supports to help the field emerge from the current crisis.

The Alliance is committed to working with the homeless services field and other national partners to further develop and promote needed solutions. Necessary change may not happen overnight, but there is no other choice but to move forward if the nation wants to reach important goals like ensuring [appropriate implementation of Housing First](#) and ending homelessness.

Low pay, high turnover, and lack of resources are a resounding theme throughout responses to this survey of homeless service providers across the country. It is clear that this sector will not be able to make progress until significant funding is allocated to address this crisis.

