

## LOW PAY COSTS THE HOMELESS RESPONSE SYSTEM TALENTED WORKERS

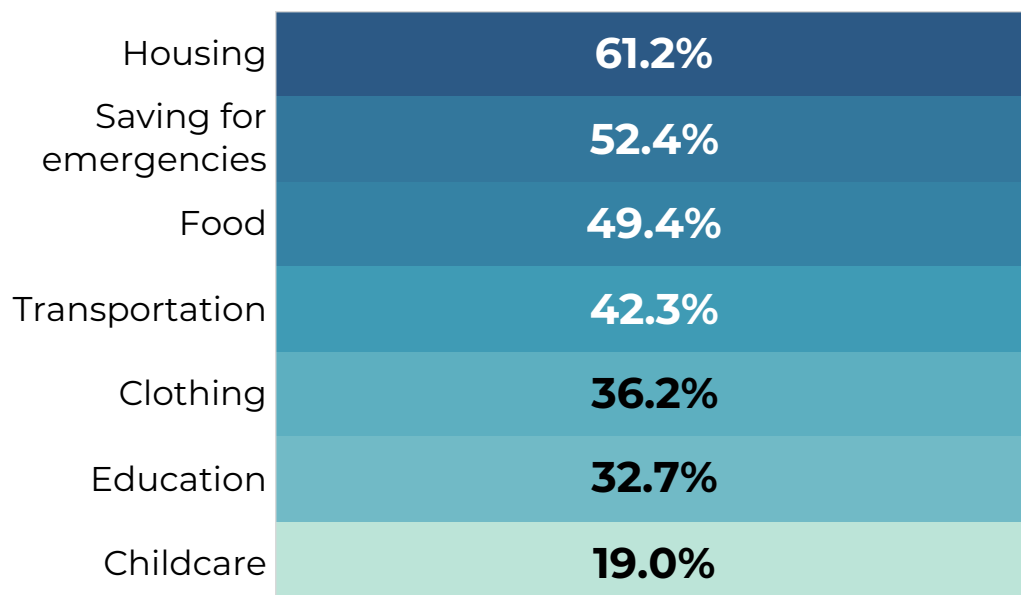
TATIANA REIS | LIVED EXPERTISE RESEARCH TEAM MEMBER

Those with lived experience of homelessness bring an unmatched depth of insight to the homeless response system. As Mary Singer's essay, "Reconsidering Strict Education Requirements and Ensuring That Professional Development is Accessible," indicates, many PWLE also pursue additional training and education to expand and develop new skills despite the barriers to accessing these resources. Even with this mix of education and lived experience, the LEARN survey reveals that they remain some of the most underpaid and financially vulnerable members of the workforce. This makes it difficult for many PWLE to build security, even after leaving homelessness.

Previous research demonstrates that workers within the homeless response system are paid too little and they experience burnout and fatigue from being overworked. Workers who have experienced homelessness appear to face even bigger challenges. To end homelessness, the response system needs workers who have the resources they need to do their jobs well.

Over 62 percent of respondents with lived experience of homelessness work multiple jobs out of necessity – their work in the homeless response system does not pay them enough to survive. Many also worry about paying for basic expenses like housing, food and transportation.

### Workers with Lived Experience of Homelessness Worry About Paying For:



It is also notable that **61 percent** of respondents with lived experience of homelessness said that at some point in their lives, their experience(s) of homelessness overlapped with their experience(s) working in the response system. While some of these respondents may have been homeless for a brief period before beginning their work in the response system, this data indicates that paying PWLE workers livable wages is especially urgent to help people regain stability and contribute fully to the work of ending homelessness.

These numbers speak to a deeply under resourced system, one that relies on lived experience to help end homelessness but does not receive the resources it needs to provide PWLE with livable wages and financial security. This has real consequences. Poor wages drive away qualified, passionate workers. It retraumatizes those with lived expertise. In some cases, it puts them at risk of returning to homelessness themselves. All of this undermines the goal of ending homelessness.

One respondent shared:

“Being a case manager, especially one who cares so much and goes above and beyond, should be recognized. The cost of living is so high, it’s almost impossible to live alone. I should not be afraid that I will also live unhoused.”

Another echoed:

“I oversee a team of about 50 people with lived experience. I wish those folks were compensated better for the work they do. Many of them are one small hiccup away from not being able to work because they may not be able to fix their cars. Also, affordable housing options for people to live in the areas they work is almost impossible. We need more affordable housing options.”

These are not isolated experiences. They represent a widespread, urgent problem. Continuums of Care (CoCs) and service providers are doing the best they can to support workers but are drastically underfunded to meet the needs of all people experiencing homelessness. With more funding, they would be able to ensure that workers are well supported, leading to improved outcomes for people experiencing homelessness.

With more federal, state, local, and philanthropic resources, CoCs could mandate livable wages for their partner agencies, prioritize workforce support programs to help workers in crisis, be transparent about how salary decisions are made, and ensure that there are sufficient affordable housing options for the response system’s workforce. Ensuring livable wages for staff would likely increase retention and make the homeless response system more impactful for people in need of support.

The homeless response system cannot function without the lived expertise of those who have received support from it. If we want to end homelessness, communities must start by protecting and uplifting the people helping to achieve this goal, especially those who have walked the path themselves. People with lived experience want to contribute their expertise to ending homelessness. To do so, they need salaries that allow them to survive and thrive.