

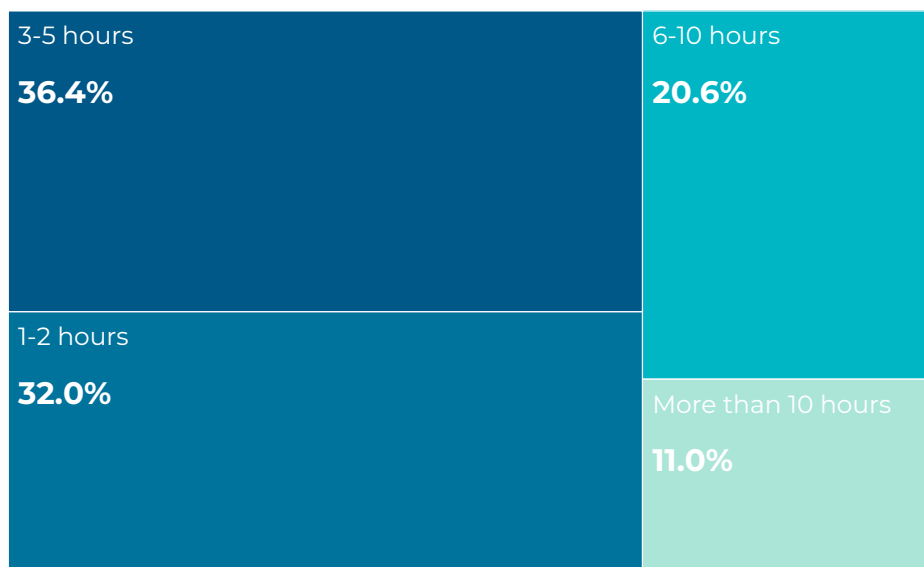
PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE ARE FORCED TO JUSTIFY AND DEFEND THEIR WORK

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Respondents to the LEARN Project survey of workers with lived expertise of homelessness (PWLE) reported spending considerable amounts of time at work advocating for their professional and personal needs. This was the case even when they had similar job and education experience compared to colleagues without lived experience. This is time PWLE could spend housing people instead. It is also an indication that PWLE feel undervalued in their roles and are skeptical that their organizations fully appreciate their unique contributions. This mistrust and stress can impact workers' mental health and lead to burnout. Many respondents say that providing services is especially challenging since they think about their own traumas and experiences when caring for people in need. This is a challenge that workers without lived experience do not need to think about. In combination with resource constraints resulting from a systemic lack of funding, this forces PWLE to constantly advocate for more support.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS: WORKERS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS

75 PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS WITH LIVED EXPERTISE OF HOMELESSNESS SPEND TIME ADVOCATING FOR THEIR PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL NEEDS



In my experience as a worker with lived experience of homelessness, PWLE are constantly asked to connect emotionally and share deeply personal and often traumatic stories, only to be excluded from using their voice for meaningful decision-making. This leads to feeling undervalued, emotionally burdened, and unsupported. Many PWLE who responded to the survey report feeling stressed because they lack real power in their roles and are forced to confront this sense of exclusion without emotional or social support.

One worker with lived experience of homelessness wrote:

“Stigma and judgment are a daily issue in the workplace. My story is quite remarkable but sadly, I have to be careful who I share my lived experience with. It has gotten in the way of my role and impacted how I am involved in conversations.”

These trends also impact the homeless response system’s effectiveness. Just **20 percent** of respondents with lived experience said that they are on senior teams and even fewer say that they are involved in funding or policy decisions. Meanwhile, the data also indicates that when PWLE are meaningfully included in the system, they have profound impacts on ending homelessness. Some organizations and CoCs appear to underutilize the valuable insights of these workers.

To better support PWLE, build trust, and foster their long-term success, organizations must begin implementing comprehensive support systems. For some organizations, this may include (but should not be limited to) access to trauma-informed mental health providers, dedicated time for mentorship, and dedicated resources for peer-led programming. Rethinking hiring practices can also be essential; removing unnecessary degree requirements and making it clear that lived expertise is treated with the same value as certain degrees can help demonstrate to PWLE staff that they have important skills to contribute.

“My experience has shaped not only my understanding, but also my ability to advocate for change in a way that theory alone never could. No amount of formal education can truly prepare you for the realities of homelessness if you’ve never experienced it firsthand.”

This type of culture change will look different based on the individual needs and resources of a particular organization, but creating more inclusive work environments, granting real decision-making power, and offering greater access to training opportunities (see Mary’s essay, “Reconsidering Strict Education Requirements and Ensuring That Professional Development is Accessible”) to ensure PWLE are equipped to lead more effectively are great places to start. By investing in these approaches, organizations can work with PWLE more authentically, and shift from symbolic representation to meaningful engagement. Ultimately, supporting PWLE as active leaders and respecting their contributions toward shaping systems that reflect their lived experiences will create more effective homeless response systems.