

POLICY *brief*

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Urban Solutions *for* Developing a Sustainable Workforce in the Homeless Services Sector of Los Angeles County

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INTRODUCTION

This policy brief was developed with the intention to promote workforce retention and strengthen the homeless services sector in Los Angeles County. In the county, homeless service organizations serve residents without housing, caring for their needs through direct contact. From serving as advocates for justice in health care, housing and decriminalization, and developing new practices that service the growing needs of residents, providers have continuously been at the forefront of human services. However, when it comes to the sustainability of their operations, perhaps the greatest task facing agencies is a response to workforce retention. While homeless service agencies appear generally enthusiastic about recent proposition's funding additions to their housing and service programs, the overall implementation of that increased funding does not include or connect to workforce development strategies for staff recruitment, cultivation, and retention.

In 2017, Measure H, a sales tax measure to fund homeless services and prevention, was approved by county voters. It is expected to generate approximately 1,000 jobs to combat homelessness.¹ However, there is no specific workforce plan to secure the human resources needed to implement these workforce expectations. While funding is available to support workforce growth, organizations struggle to fill vacant positions and retain existing employees to maximize workforce effectiveness, and to keep up with the needs of both homeless residents and workers.

In the absence of a comprehensive and cohesive workforce recruitment, growth, retention and training policy, this brief outlines recommendations in three areas to leverage the potential of homeless service organizations to help build a robust workforce. This brief advocates for developing strategies that help create a recruitment pipeline, researching the causes of high turnover, and building ladders of opportunity for advancement in the sector.

A study of six homeless service organizations, completed in the winter of 2017, found the following:

- Workers are deeply invested in working in homeless services; 92% reported having a long-term commitment to working in homeless services.
- Average job tenure of frontline workers is two years, with women making up 70% of the workforce.
- 85% of workers have experienced trauma in their lifetime.

- For many workers, a lack of trust, communication, and leadership impact their ability to work effectively.
- The systems of program development in homeless service agencies contain various methods in which workers input are not included. Approximately 70% of employees would like to be viewed as being part of shaping how their work is done.
- Workers face requirements of extensive service documentation. More than half (62%) of frontline workers do not feel equipped to meet compliance demands.
- When workers receive their paycheck, they are upset with earnings. Roughly 46% report not making a livable wage.

RECOMMENDATION 1: RECRUITMENT

Social service providers around the county face critical workforce shortages that impact the health of vulnerable populations, oftentimes without plans in place to address the issue.² The homeless services sector is no exception to this trend, and while Los Angeles County has created a hiring portal and hosted job fairs, there is no county policy for recruitment strategies. Therefore, collaborative efforts could develop strategies to find qualified workers to fill the jobs generated by Measure H. For example in other industries, they work with high schools, community colleges and universities, as well as trade schools, Workforce Investment Act funded career centers, and other institutions to create a pipeline of the workers they need. Studies show that early recruitment and various retention programs in underserved communities help increase workforce diversity and retention.³ Funders of homeless service organizations could adopt policies on recruitment strategies which could require homeless service organizations, academic institutions, and policymakers to coordinate with funders and partners on the implementation of sustainable workforce solutions in the county.

RECOMMENDATION 2: CULTIVATION

Cultivation involves creating ladders of opportunity that enable workers to acquire the skills and experience they need for positions of greater responsibility. In our study, frontline workers with histories of trauma are less likely to advance to management positions within the homeless services sector. Thus, opportunities for promotion should be more formalized for workers; this includes professional development, mentoring, and clinical support. Research shows that post-traumatic healing begins when trauma survivors are in a supportive environment, and when they feel connected to individuals with similar backgrounds. Agencies should create multi-tiered systems for workers that promote personal and professional growth. While organizations may not be experts, some specializations may be critical for addressing the complex challenges in mental health and professional skill building related to preparation for training and accreditation that could promote career advancement within the homeless services sector.

RECOMMENDATION 3: RETENTION

In order to develop incentives to retain workers within the sector, funders could invest in research to identify the root causes of high turnover. Our study shows that many frontline workers are frustrated with implementing programs they know are ineffective, as they have little voice in design or modification. Studies show that workplace democracy creates a more inviting environment by valuing the opinions and multiple identities of workers.⁴ Best practices in mental health engage community health workers in developing professional training for cultural

competence and networking that enhances programs and services.⁵ Not only does participatory development empower different groups, it strengthens communities and organizations. Therefore, similar lessons could be applied to Los Angeles County's Homeless Initiative to include frontline workers as it develops effective solutions that account for the high level of stress in working with severely disadvantaged clients and the challenges of implementing new initiatives under Measure H.

NOTE

This policy brief was based on research conducted by Vanessa Rios, Antioch University Los Angeles for Housing Works, CA, with the intent to promote workforce retention and help strengthen the homeless services sector of Los Angeles County. Jerry Jones of Inner City Law supported these efforts with expertise in public policy. For more information about the research, please email vnesscarken@gmail.com.

ENDNOTES

¹ The Los Angeles County Homeless Initiative, “A Paycheck with Purpose: Join the Fight Against Homelessness,” last modified 2018, *Measure H*, Jobs, <http://homeless.lacounty.gov/job>.

² Yuejen, "Long-term trends," 1-10.

³ Murray, "A Nursing Workforce," 138-143.

⁴ Meyers, "Diversity Regimes," 98-128.

⁵ Wennerstrom, "Community-based."