

Employees Speak Up: Engaging Voices from the Human Services Field

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Article



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Engaging Voices from the Human Services Field¹

Abstract

This qualitative study aims to understand the perceptions and experiences of human services professionals working within urban communities with respect to their work experiences, compensation, and work-life balance. Focus groups were used to collect data from direct service staff and executive leadership from diverse agencies. This study examined the words and stories, generating the following overarching themes: (1) dedication to agency model and communities served; (2) compensation and responsibilities; (3) reality of work-life balance; and (4) desire for professional growth and personal growth. The results show that while employees expressed personal fulfillment with their work, the issues of compensation, workload, and professional opportunities were still wanting. Thus, this study seeks to offer direction to human services agency leadership concerning diverse components of the total employment experience through workplace initiatives and fundamental benefit changes.

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Introduction

Human services agencies provide a wealth of services and resources to the surrounding communities they serve. This includes civic and community engagement initiatives, healthy aging, early childhood education, adult literacy, and youth development. While many lower-income, inner-city families and individuals rely on these services, agency staff are known to consistently overextend themselves to ensure that their agencies' limited resources are benefitting each of their clients (Payne, 2020). Agency staff often have to manage increasing caseloads and mounting expectations placed on service delivery programming. Personal stressors, such as low salaries and economic downturns similarly affect staff members and their households, interfering with a healthy work-life balance (Sorribes et al., 2021). Without support for staff, incidents leading to stress-related burnout may increase, eventually affecting each aspect of their agencies' operations including effective care for the community (McCoyd et al., 2023).

Acknowledging and discovering ways to improve an employee's well-being, a sound work-life balance is important to help strengthen the work environment (Irfan et al., 2023). The need to reduce staff burnout is pivotal and has been prominent in the literature (Wallace & Coughlin, 2023). Yet, there remains a paucity of new research focused on the personal insights and experiences of human services employees supporting urban communities. This includes the challenges, successes, and difficulties these employees experience on both a personal and professional level. Considering that many resource-strapped agencies struggle with retaining employees, it is essential for leadership to listen to their voices. Only through identifying, understanding, and supporting their specific and unique needs can an agency provide a positive work environment for all (Chigeda et al., 2022).

The purpose of this study is to understand the perception and experiences of staff working in community-based agencies that serve urban communities. This study sought to learn about employees' perceived work experiences and preferences, levels of compensation and benefits, and views on work-life balance, we hope to gain specific insight into the employee's total work experience and how human services leaders may leverage this understanding to be purposeful leaders. This research also seeks to explore areas where changes in policies may positively impact the workplace.

Research Questions

The research questions directing this study are:

- (1) What are the reasons that employees are attracted to working in the field of human services?*
- (2) How do these employees describe the overall challenges and benefits of this type of employment?*
- (3) In what manner do these employees view their wages and benefits?*
- (4) How do these employees attempt to achieve a work-life balance?*

Literature Review

The settlement house model is well-known for providing in-need communities with a variety of essential services. Its impact has been felt for generations, starting in the 19th century when struggling European immigrants emigrated to the United States. At the model's beginning, community leaders along with wealthy patrons identified the needs of immigrants, providing education, child care, and cultural activities to support, engage, and sustain these new

citizens (Koerin, 2003). The tradition of service to others is still found in many large, urban areas such as NYC, where settlement houses serve approximately 770,000 New Yorkers and their families with child care, professional development, ESL courses, Older Adult services, and Health and Wellness Services among others (United Neighborhood Houses, 2024; Henry Street Settlement House; 2024).

Human services professionals are often described as being attracted to their field by a combination of personal, societal, and professional motivations. Many express a strong sense of altruism and a desire to effect change in the individuals, families, and communities they serve (NASW, 2021). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), for instance, highlights the significance of a commitment to social justice, which often serves as a driving force for potential professionals entering the human services field. Additionally, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) underscores the growing need for human services professionals in addressing mental health and well-being issues faced by communities worldwide, appealing to those wanting to help others. The satisfaction gained from making a difference for communities and populations in need as well as the opportunity for continuous learning can make human services work fulfilling (CSWE, 2023).

While human services professionals and community-serving staff members may have a strong calling, their work experiences can vary. Community workers often express challenges in balancing their professional responsibilities with personal obligations (Laurenzi et al., 2021). In working with the community, human services professionals have described that seeing clients improve their lives was deeply meaningful to them, even if gratitude was not expressed (Corey & Corey, 2020; Teixeira-Moffat, 2011). Human services professionals acknowledged the role they play in fostering resiliency within the communities they serve, highlighting many affirmative experiences. Yet, the experiences and perceptions of staff members were overshadowed by their overall work environment including the effectiveness of their agency's work within the community (Saks, 2022). Positive and negative employee perceptions were partly attributed to team-oriented work with colleagues (Boyd & Larson, 2022). This is corroborated by current research that showed employees who felt supported were more engaged and demonstrated higher levels of enthusiasm in their work (Aldabbas et al., 2023).

Employee perceptions on salary and benefits can vary from agency to agency. Pay scales are generally perceived as being low compared to fields outside of human services (Despard, 2023). An example from a study conducted by Stanley et al. (2021) showed that almost half of social workers polled expressed dissatisfaction with their current salaries. Likewise, Hoefer's (2020) research identified salary disparities with human services professionals holding advanced academic degrees as compared to their counterparts in other fields who were better compensated. The view of being underpaid as a human services professional has also been linked to secondary traumatic stress that pervades agencies (Quinn et al., 2019). Financial incentives that boost low salaries is regarded as essential by employees (Slatten et al., 2021).

Work life balance is a challenge for many human services employees. Obstacles likely to disrupt work-life balance include compassion fatigue and work-related stress (Beer et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020). In turn, human services employees are prone to report burnout symptoms from their work (Saks, 2022). According to Bae et al. (2020), employees in the helping professions describe supportive work environments, professional fulfillment, and work flexibility as contributing factors for achieving necessary work-life balance. Fulfilling this

objective in leadership positions is equally important, with research showing that perceived work-life balance is associated with lower perceived levels of stress (Håkansson et al., 2021). Areas identified as promising for attaining work-life balance include coaching/mentorship opportunities and flexible work policies that accommodate employees (Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2020). Research on work-life balance recommends that agencies practice increased awareness of work-life balance issues, focusing attention on ways to improve employee well-being (Aruldoss et al., 2021).

Methods

Focus groups were used to capture and explore participant experiences related to the research questions (Clemens et al., 2017; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007). Researchers worked with the human services agencies to prepare the University Institutional Review Board (IRB) application detailing focus groups procedures. The IRB application was approved to hold focus groups with two different employee groups: (1) direct service staff; and (2) current executive leadership.

Theoretical Framework

Transformational leadership was the theory used to underpin this research study. According to Bass and Riggio (2006), a transformational leader is one who inspires the performances of their team members with a unified vision towards meaningful change within an organization. This approach is done in four distinct components. The first component calls for the leader to build trust with their employees, followed by the leader shaping an institutional vision that appeals to employee sensibilities. Encouraging innovation behaviors from employees to construct this new vision and to support and provide guidance towards organizational and individual aspirations makes up the last component (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Empathy and attentiveness to the needs of employees is a facet of transformational leadership used by the research. Being emotionally available to employees and listening to the issues affecting their job performance builds stronger relationships between leaders and their teams (Sergey et al., 2020). Providing an open platform for employees to be heard and engaged is vital to the work of the transformational leader (Shariftrud, 2013).

Procedures

Focus group participants were recruited using flyers sent to all employees via email. Each of the flyers were tailored to the different groups (direct line staff and executive leadership) for the purpose of capturing their perspectives. Five focus groups were held with three from direct service staff and two with executive leadership. Participant group size for this study ranged between four and eight individuals per focus group. The interviewing approach used by focus group moderators included a series of semi-structured questions based on the study's overarching research questions. Semi-structured questions were used to allow participants the freedom to discuss their issues and concerns without unnecessary restrictions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Morgan, 2019).

Participants gave permission for the focus groups to be audiotaped. The groups were facilitated by two trained research leaders and a recorder. The focus group began with a summary of the study and confidentiality of the group. The focus groups all included the same set of questions: introductions; opening question; transition question; key questions; and ending question (Olsen, 2011). A transition question helped participants to provide others

with their general thoughts about what it meant to them to work in these areas. Key questions were designed to gather how participants experienced their work during typical times as well as during elevated crises, such as during the COVID pandemic. In addition, questions regarding their salaries and benefits were asked. Questions also focused on how employees balanced their work and personal life demands. The closing question invited participants to reflect on what they would have liked to know before they began working in human services agencies.

Data Analysis Plan

Open coding, a line-by-line reading of the text, was used for analyzing transcripts (Strauss, 1987). The second cycle of analysis, axial coding, identified shared connections between participants' words and experiences, turning them into categorized subthemes (Charmaz, 2006). Focus coding, the last cycle of analysis, examined the relationships and connections each subtheme shared, with researchers seeking out the best possible fit to create the final overarching themes (Inaba & Kakai, 2019; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

"Memoing"² was used throughout the analysis stage for jotting down notes about specific sections of the transcripts (Holton, 2007). This allowed space for the researcher to delve into participant experiences, exploring deep-seated concepts and their potential links. Transcripts were checked multiple times to confirm emerging concepts, clusters, and themes as well as additional concepts that were potentially overlooked.

Thematic mapping was utilized in tandem with coding efforts to assist the researchers in transferring the clusters of themes into categorical groupings. The mapping allowed the analysis team to visualize how clusters could be bracketed and to discuss the appropriateness of the groupings (Terry et al., 2017).

Results

A total of 32 individuals participated in the focus groups. There were 22 direct staff who participated in the focus groups with an average age of 34.8 (SD=13.22). The majority (81.8%) were female. Participants were racially diverse, with 31.8% Black/African American, 36.4% Hispanic/Latino, 22.7% Asian, 4.6% white, and 4.6% mixed race. Nearly half (45.5%) were single, never married, while 36.4% were married, 13.6% were living with a partner, and 4.6% were divorced/separated. Almost all participants (95.5%) lived with someone. In terms of educational level, 18.2% had some college, 9.1% had an associate's degree, 36.4% had a college degree, and 36.4% had a master's degree or higher.

There were 10 individuals who participated in the leadership focus groups. The average age was 53.0 (SD=7.51) and participants self-identified as 50% females and 50% males. Ninety percent of participants were white, and 10.0% were Hispanic/Latino. Most (70.0%) participants were married, or living with a partner (20.0%), while 10.0% were divorced/separated. Ninety percent said they lived with someone. As for education level, all participants had a master's degree or higher.

² A technique used in qualitative research, where thoughts, insights, and interpretations of data generated throughout the research process are written down and preserved.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Characteristics	Direct Staff (n = 22)	Leadership (n = 10)
Age	M = 34.8, SD = 13.22	M = 53.0, SD = 7.51
Gender		
Female	81.8%	50.0%
Male	-	50.0%
Race/Ethnicity		
Black/African American	31.8%	-
Hispanic/Latino	36.4%	10.0%
Asian	22.7%	-
White	4.6%	90.0%
Mixed Race	4.6%	-
Marital Status		
Single, never married	45.5%	-
Married	36.4%	70.0%
Living with a partner	13.6%	20.0%
Divorced/Separated	4.6%	10.0%
Living Situation		
Lives with someone	95.5%	90.0%
Educational Level		
Some college	18.2%	-
Associate's degree	9.1%	-
College degree	36.4%	-
Master's degree or higher	36.4%	100.0%

The following themes emerged from the voices of employees: (1) Dedication to settlement house model and communities served; (2) Compensation and work responsibilities; (3) Work-life balance; and (4) Desire for professional growth and personal growth.

Agency Dedication to Communities Served

Participants frequently expressed their devotion to the settlement house model for its work within the community and the positive relationships made with coworkers. The mission and vision of their respective agencies was described as inspirational. In discussing this connection, the word “love” was used multiple times to illustrate the profoundly human and spiritual experience employees gained from their work. To this point, a participant said:

I really did fall in love with the [Settlement House] Model...I liked the fact that it was so diverse...and is a community.

The ability to work alongside community members, especially adolescents, was often cited as a meaningful highlight of the job. In particular, the youth development programs were described as not only having impact on the community's young people, but also program staff. According to a participant, working with youth gave her a great sense of accomplishment in that there was a noticeable difference with adolescents after programs were completed. One participant highlighted the importance of seeing the positive transformations made by young people in her work. Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating:

The fact that I get to help a lot of people [...] has expanded my horizons in terms of things that I care about.

For employees who were raised in similar environments and communities, their appreciation of the services and supportive atmosphere heightened their sense of stewardship. One participant explained that because of his past experiences in a Head Start program, he was able to make the transition from high school to college. This early experience ultimately led him to serve in a human services agency. Another participant stated, “It is a vocation” and their agency the “gold standard” in service to the community. Below is a quote that mirrors this concept of giving back to the community at large:

One strength is that I work in a community that I kind of grew up in...we suffered the same things, we've been through the same things [as the youths we serve]. So, we're able to talk about it openly and just connect through that.

Participants stressed that their work on behalf of those in need was a strength of the model, including adapting and adjusting to crises like the COVID pandemic. Participants described focusing on the needs of others as paramount even in the face of adversity. This was discussed as being a hallmark of agency work. There was a strong proclivity to address the need for services when resources were dire for the community. One example was the creation of a food pantry in an agency that did not have one prior to the pandemic.

Participants discussed their desire to improve their agencies. Infrastructure and enhancing the quality of existing programs were major concerns raised. Participants shared that online programs were plagued with technological issues that required constant upgrades. IT support was described as generally being unavailable due to a number of existing projects that they were involved within other departments. According to a participant who supervised an online academic support program, her WIFI was in desperate need of repair. Along with being ill-equipped to properly conduct services, there were children who needed help transitioning to virtual learning which created a greater amount of work and pressure. These “failings” were viewed as a persistent weakness found in their agencies. A quote on this issue was as follows:

My job is hard enough dealing with crisis and kids and tragedy and behavior issues. That's really hard. But to be honest, the hardest part of my job is navigating the administrative work in this organization that has no infrastructure.

The belief that support staff are vital to meeting the needs of community residents was deemed meaningful. Numerous leadership participants expressed their gratitude for their employees, noting that through crises and challenging times, these individuals embraced their calling to do good and assisted their colleagues and communities. This perspective contributes to making the workplace a home where each person is valued for all that they put forth on a daily basis.

From a transformational leadership lens, this connection to the settlement house model highlights the employees' sense of purpose, making it a veritable call to action and a path to be supported by leadership. The fostering of an inclusive and cohesive environment that seeks meaning and growth aligns with the transformational leader's purpose. Furthermore, the shared experiences and dedication to assisting local communities, despite infrastructural challenges, demonstrates the focus transformational leaders require to build strong, supportive relationships that create resilience in the face of mounting obstacles.

Compensation and Work Responsibilities

A common thread found throughout each focus group was the lack of compensation for the increasing tasks expected of employees. Oftentimes, participants expressed that they were “skating by financially” and “severely underpaid” for their educational credentials. Some participants contemplated a move from their respective agencies to other organizations that pay higher wages. The need for improved salaries was said to be linked to employee retention as numerous participants explained that co-workers with family responsibilities were more likely to take on a second job to improve their finances. With respect to the fiscal realities faced by numerous employees, one participant stated:

There are people who are working [at human services agencies] that are making just above the poverty level extension...when you have people that are putting in the type of work that they're doing in the time that they're putting in and they're barely making it, you know that is a problem.

The frustration involved with low pay has caused some employees to feel conflicted to whether they should remain in a job that they love or to leave it for a position that will have increased financial security. Included in this challenging internal dialogue is the unrelenting workloads that have seemingly increased over the years. A participant who was asked to continue responsibilities attached to another role within their agency articulated, “I already have a caseload of 40 plus people, and now I also have to do this. Am I getting paid more for that? No.” Being overworked and underpaid was further described by another participant who stated that, “We don’t get paid enough for the work that we do and we’re constantly being pushed to add more and more and more things into our schedule.”

Being overwhelmed with work responsibilities was commonplace among staff participants. Agency leadership also expressed frustrations at not being able to pay their employees what they felt was needed and deserved. Participants also confirmed that leaders are placing more responsibilities on their staff as organizational resources are limited for hiring additional full-time staff. According to one participant:

It's unequal. Generally, our staff makes less, do more, and there has to be systemic ways that we can address these pretty glaring gaps.

Agency leadership discussed their concerns for the well-being of staff who made daily sacrifices. For example, many participants revealed feelings of guilt knowing that they were allowed to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic when some staff members had to physically be at work to administer services to the community.

Salary struggles, including living paycheck to paycheck, were cited as difficult because many staff could not stop working for an extended period of time. Fearing for the health of staff and not being able to pay extra troubled many of the participants. Limited resources, federal funding stipulations, and the contractual dynamic between unionized and non-unionized staff were cited as challenges requiring creative solutions for overall fiscal equity.

Transformational leadership theory envisions the leader as a motivator who addresses employee needs to improve their overall work. In looking at salaries and work responsibilities, the transformational leader has significant hurdles to address with their employees’ dissatisfaction in their pay and workloads. The idea that highly educated employees perceive themselves as being “severely underpaid” in the face of growing responsibilities underscores the need for leaders to reevaluate compensation and work distribution. Being an advocate for

overworked and underpaid employees calls transformational leaders to put employee well-being at the top of their priorities. The challenge for the transformational leader is to improve compensation, address workloads, and ensure that employees feel valued and supported in their positions.

Work-Life Balance

The work-life balance of agency employees was described as a constant challenge among participants. While recognizing that having personal time for self-care was vital for leading healthier lifestyles, difficulties in using time off were discussed at length. Extensive workloads and not having adequate coverage for absent staff members was cited as producing anxiety and guilt in participants who were considering vacation time. One participant stated:

We get tons of vacation time. It's beautiful. However, if I know I've got programs five days a week and we've got a grant report to do, and I'm the only one that knows the numbers, it's a little hard [to take time off].

Apprehension over taking time off was not just relegated to vacation time. Sick days were also a source of stress for employees who worried about their programs and who would take the helm in their absence. As voiced by one participant,

There is a looming pressure of like, I can't call out sick because who's going to run check in tomorrow?

Hiring needed staff in light of limited resources was mentioned throughout the focus groups.

The leadership focus groups raised concerns for the well-being of their staff and emphasized the need for staff to use their vacation benefits. Concerns on this topic from leadership participants came out through statements like, "Your time [off] is your time" and "You can't get that time back with family." Being flexible with employees and making sure that staff used their benefits was seen as an important responsibility that falls on leadership. Ironically, many of the leadership participants stated they have trouble following their own advice for employees, often sacrificing their personal time for work.

I don't have a healthy work-life balance. I'm aspiring to have a healthy work-life balance...it only took me about 20 years to feel entitled to that.

In light of the previous pandemic, agency employees and leadership realized the need to make healthier choices. This acknowledgment caused one participant to state, "By the end of the summer, I was pretty rundown already, like a lot of people and I just made the decision to get healthy again" during the pandemic.

Managing the demands of work was a significant factor. As mentioned across the focus group, workloads pose problems that cross over into employees' personal lives. It was cited various times that employees would stay late at work or bring work home to keep up with expectations. Though leader participants mentioned to staff that "work will be here tomorrow," some employees felt that they needed to work longer hours to show that they could have handling their job responsibilities. For some participants in the direct staff focus groups, part of this approach was further illustrated in their commitment to agency work, hoping to move up the ranks and into an eventual leadership position. It is important to note that some participants explained that much of this pressure to perform was internalized by participants themselves as compared to leadership imposing pressure on staff.

Flexibility was also cited as important for work life balance. One participant described how her agency permitted her to work part-time after giving birth and eventually to return full-time to her position when she was ready. A parent of a child with special needs explained that, “When you have a child with special needs, sometimes you need a job that will understand that and settlement houses understand that.”

This understanding may not always equate to a family-centric, work-life balance. To this point, participants also explained how long commutes and the urgent nature of their work created anxiety. As another participant stated:

Pre-pandemic there is no way I could do a job like this or similar without having a spouse who's able to make certain sacrifices and changes and have children. So that's the only way that I could have the life balance and do this work.

While the previous pandemic has changed the landscape of work, it has inadvertently allowed working parents the flexibility to work from home and address their childcare needs. A concern expressed by participants was a loss of this flexibility over time.

Promoting a healthy work-life balance is critical for transformational leaders. Employees expressed anxiety and guilt when using vacation or sick days, illustrating the need for leaders to recognize, promote and ensure that employees use these benefits without stress of coverage. The importance of personal time, especially since leadership also struggles to maintain a healthy balance, calls for them to model healthier work habits for employees. Flexibility and understanding the increased demands brought upon by this kind of work is essential. Leaders who be pivotal in addressing stressors or issues employees face.

Desire for Professional and Personal Growth

Professional development and the opportunity to grow into a leadership position was identified as a goal for many agency workers. To this point, a participant said, “There is no opportunity. I work in a small agency. It's like maybe four or five of us. There is absolutely no room for growth opportunity.” Many participants mentioned that there were no formal training programs that were geared towards developing leadership qualities or those skill sets needed to move up the administrative ladder. In turn, the lack of professional engagement was discouraging. Participants stated that they would like to be part of the long-term future of their agencies. As stated by a participant:

There's not enough put into staff development...you have management that you know are privileged to go to certain types of trainings that really could also be beneficial to middle and lower-level staff.

Participants in the leadership focus groups echoed the need for developing entry to mid-level staff members so they are prepared if a better opportunity within the agency becomes available. The leadership participants confirmed that senior-level leadership opportunities are difficult to come by due to low turnover rates. However, they confirmed that an employee can still grow and reach a higher-level position. As explained by a participant:

I have so many group leaders who have advanced to program directors...what we're committed to doing is really working with our staff and developing career plans.

Benefits such as professional development, tuition reimbursement, enhanced healthcare options, and retirement plans were priority areas that needed more attention. Some participants stated that this was an issue for non-union staff members and part-time

employees who generally make less than unionized staff employed within agencies. On the rising cost of healthcare and the lack of affordable options, one participant shared: “Those staff who aren't in a union benefit, they're forced to take a really expensive healthcare package and so that eats into that \$15 minimum wage.” Similarly, the disparity between union and non-union workers in pay and benefits was summed up by another leader participant who explained:

My teachers are unionized. They've gotten raises every year...Our teachers finally got pay parity with the Department of Education last year and they did give us the difference. But I have all my assistant teachers, all my food handlers, my maintenance staff in that program, my administrative staff that I've been getting the same dollar in year nine that I got in year one and I've had to try to find a way to give increases. You know, because people are not staying nine years without a raise, it's... dedication is one thing. But you know, no one's going to stay in a job nine years without getting an increase.

Some participants in the leadership group expressed that they would want to provide the same benefits across the board for all of their staff. However, restrictive funding and limited resources do not permit these actions. Significant changes in salary and benefits would have to come from state and federal policies guaranteeing these changes. As summarized by one participant: “There are certain things we can do. But if we want fairness across the board or to get closer to fairness, it has to happen at a systems level; a policy level.”

Prioritization of staff development and initiating pathways for advancement is a need that employees would like their leaders to expand upon. The need for enhanced training programs and opportunities within many agencies aligns with the transformational leadership ethos of preparing and championing employees towards a defining vision. Developing entry to mid-level staff, with career planning resources and professional development initiatives is an investment towards all parties and their underlying agency goals. Benefits like tuition reimbursement, improved health care, and salary increases, can help leaders to create the desired work environment that supports the aspirations of their employees.

Limitations

There are few limitations to this study. Some of the data collected was during COVID-19. This timeframe possibly influenced participant insights about their work and personal lives. Another aspect that may be viewed as a limitation was there were multiple focus group facilitators who participated throughout the five sessions. They followed the same script and procedures but may have stimulated different discussion. Also due to small sample size in a project of this nature limits generalizability.

Discussion

The passion and dedication of individuals working in human services agencies such as settlement houses originate from the strongly held belief that their work strengthens the community. This dedication aligns with previous research detailing human services professionals as being intrinsically motivated by the community and the common good (Corey & Corey, 2020; Teixeira-Moffat, 2011). Multiple participants were originally from the communities that they currently serve, with some still being residents. This intimate connection to the community may explain the dedication and calling to their community-based service work.

All focus group participants underscored the importance of the services delivered to individuals, youths, families, and older adults, viewing themselves as lifelines for their clients. Participants equally expressed the critical nature of providing quality attention to staff members. Numerous participants across focus groups were concerned that a lack of administrative attention to well-being, limited salaries, and guaranteed benefits would affect staff retention. Compensation and benefit issues were also prominent in related research literature (Hoefer, 2020; Stanley et al., 2021). Numerous participants even questioned their own professional futures within their agencies, seeing their struggles to make ends meet as being a perpetual state.

Similarly, the results illustrate that policies aimed at prioritizing staff well-being may serve as a logical step towards enhancing employee and agency relationships. Recognizing their role as vital lifelines for clients, leadership may seek innovative ways to ensure their professional and financial stability. Addressing staff concerns about their future and their ability to make desirable salaries is pivotal to retaining human services employees. Seeing what steps agency leadership could make towards these concerns would be ideal. During the leadership focus groups, participants did express that they could moderately impact salary through budget work. Following through with such an action may be mutually beneficial for increasing employment satisfaction. An informed plan to advocate for employee needs at the state and federal level, incorporating research, and the voices of employees, should be explored.

An environment focused on self-care and employee well-being was discussed as being vital. Having supportive colleagues and empathetic supervisors affected the perception of participants, making them feel connected to their agency's mission of helping others. Though it was not quantitatively measured, the gratification expressed for helpful colleagues and supervisors resonated throughout the transcripts. Feeling safe and respected in one's workplace came through in the participant's words. In particular, confidence in their colleagues' ability to support each other was articulated as a benefit in their respective agency work.

To cultivate a supportive and nurturing workplace, several agency wide, policy-based measures may be proposed. First, workplace well-being programs should be considered, focusing on self-care and mental health. Provisions to create a platform where employees may provide feedback regularly would be beneficial, ensuring that employees feel heard and respected.

Participants were eager to explore opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skill sets. Providing professional development opportunities and training may help to engage and prepare them for new opportunities. This investment can also demonstrate the agencies' commitment to their employees' professional trajectory in-house if senior positions become available.

Recognizing and rewarding collaborative efforts among employees can further motivate a united, supportive workplace. Formal policies promoting a respectful and positive work environment should be explored.

Managing workloads are the responsibilities that employees have to their departments and the agency as a whole. This may impact employee stress and well-being. Feelings of not making progress in their workload may create a sense of being overwhelmed.

Stress may be related to individuals' work-life balance. For direct line staff, finding coverage to use time off increases their stress levels when taking time off should be a time of anticipating a much-needed break from work. For supervisors, the idea of leaving their position to take vacation time creates anxiety, with participants mentioning that they would worry about the state of their agency in their absence instead of turning towards needed relaxation. The challenges of having a formal hybrid schedule, during and post-pandemic, physically and mentally may exhaust those who felt they could accomplish more quality work with additional flexibility.

Addressing the concerns raised in the focus groups, it is crucial that agencies implement comprehensive strategic policies to mitigate work-related stress and burnout. First, assessing and placing a reasonable limit on caseloads and overall workloads is suggested. Agencies should review task assignments, ensuring that employees' responsibilities are manageable and aligned with the ever-changing needs of the community. Personal responsibilities towards departments and the agency should be clearly defined and understood by all employees. A structured hybrid work model may be an advisable workplace policy, accommodating staff whose positions lend themselves to a hybrid model and based on their needs. This change has the potential to optimize efficiency and produce higher quality work as well as aid in staff retention. For front-line staff, a rotational system for coverage during time-off should be considered, allowing for planned, stress-free breaks. For supervisors, it would be beneficial to have a designated deputy or standby, enabling them to take leave without worrying about agency operations during their absence. Mental health and well-being check-ins should be integrated into a wellness initiative, ensuring that both supervisors and staff have the necessary support and resources to address stress and burnout.

Applying transformational leadership theory emphasizes the importance of having an environment that supports both professional and personal growth of employees. Human services employees and their agencies are driven by the belief that their work strengthens the community. This lines up with previous research that shows intrinsic motivation as influencing employee satisfaction. Challenges relating to professional development opportunities, compensation, and work-life balance issues, illustrate the need for transformational leaders to advocate for policies that place staff well-being and development at the forefront. Devising comprehensive strategies towards workload, flexible work models, and professional development programs, leaders can help improve employee satisfaction, retention, and, potentially, overall agency effectiveness.

Conclusion

Informed by both the literature review and focus group findings, understanding the experiences, challenges, successes, and perceptions of work-life balance of human services employees is crucial. Not only did the focus group findings confirm existing literature, but this research significantly adds to the breadth and scope of understanding employee experiences in the human services field through the voices of employees. Organizational change, as many participants emphasized, is a continuous process. Transformational leadership theory understands this continuous process and the required patience, collaboration, and shared commitment needed to develop solutions. As agencies navigate potential reforms and policy implications, it is paramount that leaders prioritize discussions on salaries, wages, and benefits. Ensuring that these conversations are grounded in mutual trust and collaboration is pivotal. By doing so, we can enhance the resilience and efficacy of community-based

agencies, ensuring they remain a vital support system for the individuals, families, and communities they serve.

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