INSTITUTE for SHELTER CARE

Staffing Challenges Report

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Introduction

The Institute for Shelter Care seeks to equip sexual exploitation/trafficking shelters by providing them with research that facilitates decision support. This study summarizes current staffing challenges and hiring practices among shelters. It is the goal of this report that shelter leaders can take this summary of data and apply it to their shelters as they see fit, to best serve their survivors, staff, and volunteers.

Methodology

The survey population for this report included the 232 agencies identified as open and actively providing residential care to survivors of sexual exploitation/trafficking according to the Institute for Shelter Care's National Landscape Map. They were invited to respond to a survey via email, and 45 responses were received; therefore, this survey sample reflects 19% of the trafficking shelter population in the United States.

Respondents

Program Type and Demographic Served

It is important to note that for this portion of the survey, many respondents belong, simultaneously, to more than one group, so the percentages amount to more than 100%. Out of 45 respondents:

- 4 (9%) had emergency shelters (1-5 days)
- 13 (29%) provided stabilization programs (3-6 months)
- 38 (84%) provided restoration programs (12+ months)
- 12 (27%) provided independent housing.

Almost all (91%) shelters served females only, and 9% of respondents served any gender.

Of the populations served by these agencies, 10 (22%) served younger minors (14 and younger); 12 (27%) served older minors (15-17 years old); 26 (58%) served young adults (18-21 years old); 37 (82%) served adults; and 9 (20%) served adults with children.

Of the data recorded, 35% of responses were reported by the agency's Executive Director; 47% by the agency's Program Director; and 18% by miscellaneous positions held within the agency.

Staffing Statistics

Ideal Number of Staff

Of 44 responses recorded, agencies reported that their ideal staffing would average:

- 11 full-time employees
- 5 part-time employees
- 3 interns
- 21 volunteers.

This set of data also shows that the average number of beds exclusively for exploited/trafficked persons per agency was 11, which was higher than our prior studies. Across 2021 and other 2022 studies, the average number of beds per agency was between 9 and 10. Thus, the data suggest that 1.5 employees per resident might be a reasonable accommodation for effective survivor care.

Bed Capacity

While the average number of beds per shelter in this study is 11, only one agency reported operating at a 100% bed capacity, meaning most shelters do not operate at full capacity. In fact, 21 respondents reported having to reduce their number of available beds based on the lack of direct care staff. Eight respondents reported having persevered through the effects of inadequate staffing even though they considered reducing the number of beds. More than 50% of respondents reported having to stop taking referrals due to inadequate staffing, and 5 agencies reported having to shut down altogether for a season.

What do you estimate is your annual average bed capacity across 2020-2022?

Percentage of beds filled — 25%, 50%, 58%, 60%, 75%, 87%, 100%

Percentage of shelters operating at this bed capacity
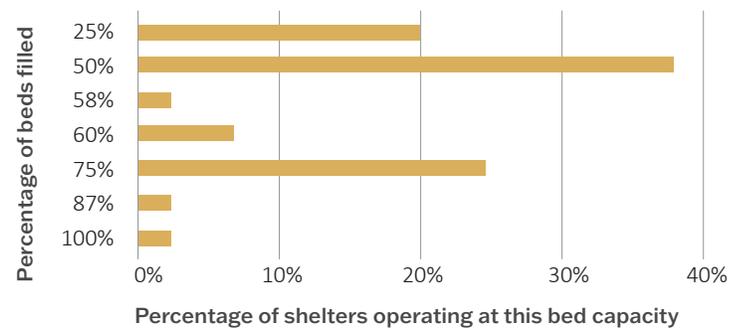
Operational Challenges

Of 35 respondents, 11 described staffing turnover and/or burnout as a primary challenge to operating their programs at full capacity. Twenty of those respondents also noted how difficult it was to find and hire qualified staff. Many remarked that they are not even receiving applicants for the positions needed to satisfy the requirements of a fully functional agency. One respondent noted, "Limited staff for evenings and weekends … allowed residents too much freedom that compromised their healing and recovery. With limited staff, the burnout increases at an expedited rate." When burnout increases because of staff shortages, staffing shortages are likely to increase as well, making this a cyclical challenge.

Staff Shortages → Staff Burnout
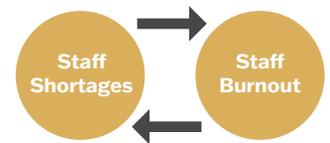
Qualities and Qualifications

Of the respondents, 25 noted that word of mouth was the most utilized method for identifying qualified staff; 12 used LinkedIn, Indeed, or other job search engines/websites; and 9 preferred hiring internally from volunteer bases or interns.

Among attributes that agencies may look for in a candidate included more of the soft skills: emotional maturity, flexibility, knowledge of substance abuse/recovery and empathy stood out as the most desirable qualities in a candidate. Across the board, emotional maturity was valued. One respondent noted, "A lot of people want to try and work here without experience, [and] we find their heart is there, but they do not have the thick skin and end up quitting soon after they start because of how the clients act or because I believe they think they can "fix" our clients in a day or two, when in reality, the trauma these clients have been through will require months to years of rehabilitation."

Staff Attributes	Essential	Important	Neutral	Not Important	Detrimental
Emotional maturity		100%	0%	0%	0%
Availability/Flexibility in schedule		98%	2%	0%	0%
Knowledge of substance abuse/recovery		89%	4%	7%	0%
Empathy (able to personally relate)		87%	13%	0%	0%
Prior experience with traumatized populations		84%	9%	7%	0%
Spiritual maturity		82%	13%	4%	0%
Strong support network		79%	18%	2%	0%
Willing to take less compensation		70%	18%	9%	2%
Prior human services experience	13%	56%	20%	11%	0%
Cultural/Ethnic diversity	24%	42%	33%	0%	0%
Prior residential care experience	7%	51%	29%	13%	0%
Mental Health degree or certificate	4%	29%	67%		0%
Prior Victim/Survivor	4%	24%	65%		7%
Social work degree	2%	27%	66%		4%
Age: mature (e.g., over age 35)	4%	31%	65%		0%
Age: youthful (closer to the age of residents)	4%	4%	87%		4%

In contrast, some of the characteristics that these agencies reported as being Neutral/Not Important in direct care staff included credentials and/or lived experience. Least relevant seems to be age, whether significantly older or younger. Some agencies voiced that prior victims/survivors working with other survivors had a tendency to be detrimental rather than helpful, as it created unnecessary chaos and/or caused the survivor-staff to become triggered, relapse or become re-traumatized.

Two agencies reported that having staff with a mental health credential or social work degree was more harmful than helpful because it presented as a lack of teachability. One respondent stated, "Many with a social work degree, especially if they have worked for a social work agency, are often not trainable when it comes to direct care [or] trauma-informed care. We have unfortunately had a couple who seemed to believe that they already knew everything and actually escalated our residents rather than helping them."

Live-in (overnight) or weekend positions were described as the most difficult to fill, attesting to atypical work hours and a lack of willingness to be flexible.

Training and Compensation

Less than half of respondents described having prior certifications as helpful, perhaps due to the fact that training is required regardless of educational background. On average, agencies are investing in training a new staff at a commitment of 10 days. As a part of training, more than half (51%) of respondents require candidates to "shadow" a supervisor prior to being hired with their agency. Many agencies noted wanting to offer more training, but are impeded by the time, availability, and cost.

Commonly cited topics covered in new staff training were:

- Agency policies & procedures
- Trauma-informed care
- First-Aid/CPR
- Addiction and recovery
- De-escalation and crisis management
- Shift shadowing

- Medication management
- Mandated reporting
- Mental health diagnoses
- Vicarious trauma
- Self-care
- Human trafficking awareness

Compensation and benefits packages offered by agencies varied, but most fell in the normal to better-than-average range. Of those who offered lower or significantly lower compensation compared to other similar positions in their state, 53% also offered fewer benefits. Twenty percent of agencies were unaware of their state's average benefits packages. Of the agencies who offered less or significantly less benefits compared to other similar positions in their state, 37% did not compensate with a higher wage, and 16% were unaware of their state's average.

How does your benefits package/compensation for direct care staff compare to other similar positions in your state?
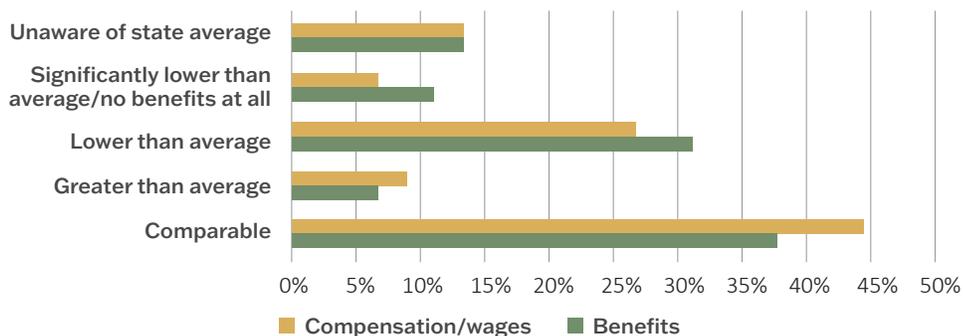
Staff Tenure and Retention Trends

The average time a staff serves in a residential shelter agency is 1.7 years. Three-quarters of respondents reported that employees leaving give a two-weeks' notice. Nearly every agency reported experiencing one or more employee(s) being terminated for misconduct or violation of agency policy. Of 43 responses collected, the most cited reasons for staff leaving were:

- #1 – the work is too hard (emotionally, spiritually, mentally),
- #2 – staff are disillusioned about what really goes into working in these environments,
- #3 – work schedules are too irregular and/or demanding.

Agencies have forged creative ways to increase staff retention and to compensate their employees for their hard work. Some of these ideas were recorded in the responses:

- Wellness stipend
- Free therapy/counseling
- Staff meetings/team building activities
- Recognition/Employee of the Month
- Open communication between staff and supervisors

- Encouraged self-care
- Flexible time off
- Raises/bonuses
- Continued training
- Healthy workplace culture

It may be incumbent on shelter hiring managers to set clearer expectations in the recruitment and hiring process. As the Institute has noted, sometimes shelter agencies lean too heavily on an emotional appeal for working in this context. This study suggests that candidates with greater emotional stability fair better. Multiple agencies reported having to raise their standards for hiring, evaluating qualifications such as emotional and spiritual maturity heavily prior to hiring a candidate, watching for weaknesses or "red flags," and ensuring the candidate has a realistic perspective of the work that goes into direct-care positions. One respondent noted:

> **We look for people who are called specifically into the work of anti-trafficking and that's it's [sic] been there long-term, not just a newfound passion for a hot topic, but a true calling from the Lord. We also look for people who have realistic views of the nature of the work, relapse, suffering, and trauma and don't come in with a savior complex. We want people who are both qualified professionally to do the work but also spiritually mature."**

Conclusion

Anti-trafficking shelters are met with a myriad of challenges when it comes to operating an efficient, fully functional program. Staffing levels fluctuate due to a variety of reasons, such as unmet expectations and lack of flexibility, and the staff who choose to stay are often at risk of burnout based on inadequate staffing levels.

Shelters may not be able to offer the most competitive wages or benefits packages; however, many shelters have developed their own methods that offer incentives to provide their staff with some respite. Recognizing the dedication of staff with raises and bonuses, free counseling, and keeping a direct line of communication between staff and supervisors are among some of the interventions shelters are doing to retain their staff.

Agencies need to continue to adapt their hiring practices based on lessons learned, and not give into the pressure to hire individuals based on emotional appeals or some externally valued characteristics. They need to communicate forthrightly about the demands of the work. While doing so may narrow the hiring pool initially, in the long run these practices have the potential to strengthen staff retention and minimize the stressors in such an emotionally taxing field of work.