

SUPPORTING THOSE WHO SUPPORT: A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH TO STAFF WELLBEING IN HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

AUTHOR:

Dalma Fabian, Policy Officer, FEANTSA

DESIGN BY:

Bryony Martin, Communications Officer, FEANTSA

IMAGES:

Cover: [Brown Paper Texture Background by Claudiodivizia](#)

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SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

Understanding the link between trauma and homelessness is essential for both improving client outcomes and supporting staff wellbeing. By integrating trauma-informed and psychologically informed principles, organisations can create safer, more supportive environments that benefit clients and staff alike. This report serves as a step toward recognising and addressing the unique mental health challenges of frontline homelessness workers, providing recommendations and best practices, and a call to action to invest in and to embed trauma-informed wellbeing in homelessness services.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Why Focus on Mental Health and Wellbeing at Work?

Social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, and work. Among these, employment and work conditions are recognised as critical factors influencing both physical and mental health, as highlighted by the World Health Organisation (WHO). The connection between work and mental health is important: workplaces can act as both protective and risk factors for mental wellbeing. Decent work provides financial security, fosters social connections, and promotes personal growth—all contributing to positive mental health outcomes. Conversely, poor working conditions, such as high stress, inadequate support, or discrimination, can intensify mental health challenges.¹

The importance of addressing mental health and wellbeing in the workplace is gaining recognition globally. International and European guidelines advocate for holistic strategies that encompass prevention, early detection, and reintegration. These approaches aim to mitigate psychosocial risks, build resilience, and support employees in both their professional and personal lives.

However, addressing workplace mental health remains challenging. Mental health is often undervalued compared to physical health. Stigma, lack of awareness, and an unwillingness to invest in mental health policies leave many employees unsupported. To address these issues, evidence-based strategies are needed that ensure workplaces are inclusive, safe, and conducive to mental wellbeing.

Mental health at work is also gaining prominence on the European political agenda. For example, the “High-Level Conference on Mental Health and Work” under the Belgian EU Presidency in 2024 called for a comprehensive approach to mental health, emphasising prevention, reintegration, and policy development. The conference underscored the urgency of an **EU Directive on Mental Health and Work** to harmonise protections across member states.²

Workplace mental health and wellbeing often gain attention during crises. An obvious example is the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the significant psychosocial risks faced by frontline workers. The pandemic underscored the urgent need for workplace mental health support, particularly for those in high-stress and frontline roles.

Frontline work in the homelessness sector presents additional challenges. It is estimated that **1.2 million people are homeless across Europe on any given night**. This figure has been rising steadily since 2008, reflecting a deepening housing crisis and growing inequalities.³ Frontline homelessness workers face immense pressures, managing crises and supporting an increasingly diverse range of clients. A recent UK survey of over 1,000 staff

members working in homelessness services revealed alarming trends: 84% of frontline workers reported increased demand for their services, and 92% struggled to find suitable housing for those they support.⁴ This growing demand further strains the mental health and resilience of homelessness sector staff.

1.2. Trauma and Homelessness

Trauma is closely linked with homelessness, significantly impacting both individuals experiencing homelessness and professionals supporting them. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction increase vulnerability. These early traumas can lead to long-term mental, physical, and social challenges, significantly increasing the likelihood of homelessness in adulthood. Research highlights the near universality of ACEs among people experiencing homelessness, with 89.8% reporting at least one ACE and 53.9% reporting four or more.⁵ Trauma and violence often continue in later life perpetuating a cycle of trauma and violence. For women, this will often manifest as gender-based domestic violence - a leading cause of homelessness among women.

Homelessness itself is a profoundly traumatising experience, involving multiple losses: the loss of home, safety, and security, as well as connections to family, community, and a sense of stability. Sleeping rough or staying in homelessness services can further expose individuals to violence and exploitation, perpetuating cycles of trauma. Judith Herman describes trauma as disempowering, stripping individuals of control, connection, and meaning, and overwhelming their ability to cope. These effects can severely impact a person's sense of safety, emotional regulation, and capacity for relationships.⁶

1.3. Recognising Trauma in Homelessness Services (TIC and PIE)

As understanding of trauma's impact continues to grow, homelessness services are increasingly adopting trauma-informed approaches. This shift moves away from asking, "What is wrong with the person?" and instead focuses on understanding "What happened to them?". Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) acknowledges that many behaviours exhibited by individuals experiencing homelessness are responses to past trauma.⁷ TIC is a strengths-based framework that prioritises the physical, psychological, and emotional safety of both clients and staff. By fostering a supportive environment, it helps trauma survivors regain a sense of control and empowerment. Similarly, Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) integrate psychological principles into service design and delivery, aiming to enhance the emotional and mental well-being of both service users and staff.

Both TIC and PIE emphasise safety, compassion, and empowerment as core principles aiming to minimise the risk of re-traumatisation for both

clients and staff. Both approaches acknowledge the profound impact of trauma on frontline staff. Workers in homelessness services frequently witness distressing situations and engage with individuals who have endured complex trauma, which can lead to compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary trauma. By integrating trauma-informed and psychologically informed principles, organisations can create safer and more supportive environments that benefit both clients and staff. These approaches contribute to better engagement, improved service outcomes, fewer incidents of violence and challenging behaviour, increased staff retention, and overall enhanced well-being for everyone involved.⁸

In the UK and Ireland, many homelessness services have embraced TIC and PIE as core organisational frameworks. While these specific terms may not always be explicitly used in other parts of Europe, elements of TIC and PIE are increasingly being integrated into service provision across Europe, reflecting a broader recognition of the strong connection between trauma and homelessness.

1.4. Methodology and Findings

This report is based on interviews with 18 professionals working in the homelessness sector across Europe, all of whom have frontline experience, although most are currently in management roles. The aim was to understand the unique challenges faced by those working directly with people experiencing homelessness, identify risk and protective factors, and explore existing organisational strategies for supporting staff wellbeing. The report also highlights gaps in current practices and provides recommendations for improving mental health and wellbeing support in homelessness services.

Participants identified **several key themes**:

- **The unique context and demands of working in homelessness services.**
- **The qualities and skills required for effective frontline work.**
- **Risk factors such as exposure to trauma, high workload, and lack of resources.**
- **Protective factors, including supportive management, peer networks, and trauma-informed organisational practices.**

This report also outlines examples of good practices and recommendations for creating a trauma-informed culture within organisations. While each workplace has its own context, strengths, and challenges, the findings reveal common themes and needs across countries.

2. THE REALITY OF FRONTLINE HOMELESSNESS WORK: SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES AND MENTAL HEALTH RISK FACTORS

Working in the homelessness sector presents distinct challenges due to the intersection of complex client needs, systemic and structural barriers and inequalities, and the emotional toll of the work. As Alexander from Austria remarked, “You’re not just working with individuals—you’re confronting the systemic failures of society.” The nature of this work requires professionals to navigate multiple overlapping issues, often with limited resources. Participants in the interviews highlighted the following key areas that distinguish homelessness work from other fields.

2.1. Complexity of Issues and Diversity of the Homelessness Population

Homelessness is often intersecting with a range of overlapping challenges, including mental health issues, substance use issues, experiences of gender-based violence, trauma, and chronic illness. Workers in this sector are required to address these interrelated issues simultaneously. In addition, the evolving demographics of homelessness present new challenges for frontline workers, e.g. the rising number of older individuals and families affected by the housing crisis. This shift requires services to adapt quickly to support those who previously may not have needed assistance. In several countries, the homelessness crisis overlaps with the refugee crisis which requires professionals to adapt to many different challenges, e.g. to navigate asylum procedures, language barriers etc.

Impact on Staff

This broad and demanding nature of homelessness work can be overwhelming for staff, as they must be adapting and responding to ever-changing circumstances. The unpredictability of clients’ needs, combined with the lack of systemic solutions, often leads to chronic stress.

We’re not just social workers—we’re problem-solvers, advocates, and sometimes the only consistent presence in someone’s life.
- Alexander, Austria

Unlike other forms of social work, homelessness support requires a deep understanding of mental health and addiction because they are so intertwined with housing instability.
- Juan Manuel, Spain

A huge number of those we support are refugees who have been through extreme trauma and displacement.
- Maria, Greece

This is not the same as working with the elderly, children, or vulnerable families. Homelessness is a net of complicated issues that intersect—housing, employment, health, and social exclusion.
- Nuno, Portugal

2.2. Structural Barriers and Lack of Resources

Systemic and structural barriers further complicate efforts to support people experiencing homelessness. Many services operate within fragmented systems, where clients with the most complex needs often fall through the cracks. Workers report significant frustration in being unable to provide holistic solutions due to these systemic constraints.

Many workers describe experiencing moral distress—a feeling of frustration and helplessness when systemic limitations prevent them from providing the support they know their clients need. The conditions in which staff operate also vary widely. Those working in overcrowded night shelters or day centers report feeling overwhelmed, whereas those involved in Housing First programs or other long-term housing solutions express greater job satisfaction as these approaches provide genuine solution to solve homelessness.

Impact on Staff

Underfunding, rigid policies, and high caseloads contribute to burnout and mental exhaustion among staff. Many struggle to meet client needs while dealing with limited resources, bureaucratic barriers, and systemic constraints.

When you work in a system that doesn't support your clients, how do you stay motivated?
- Marthe, France

You know what needs to be done, but the resources or policies just aren't there to make it happen.
- Nuno, Portugal

The lack of affordable housing and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis make it impossible for many to exit homelessness. People are trapped in a cycle, and as staff, you feel powerless.
- Boróka, Hungary

The most frustrating thing is when you have no resources to help. Some clients aren't entitled to benefits, and there's nothing you can do.
- Alexander, Austria

It's frustrating to see clients stuck in the system with no clear path forward.
- Juan Manuel, Spain

Many frontline workers experience 'system capture'—the feeling that there's nothing they can do because the system is broken.
- Juliet, United Kingdom

Homelessness workers are constantly battling a system that wasn't designed for the people they serve, and that takes a toll on their motivation and well-being.
- Kristina, Romania

2.3. Emotional and Psychological Toll

Workers in the homelessness sector regularly encounter clients who have experienced severe trauma, including abuse, violence, and systemic neglect. Hearing these stories and witnessing daily struggles can be cause traumatic stress.

Impact on Staff

Chronic exposure to emotionally charged situations, combined with high caseloads, leads to mental exhaustion and burnout. Constant exposure to trauma increases the risk of secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue, making staff more susceptible to vicarious trauma—where repeated exposure to clients' suffering alters their own sense of safety and trust, mirroring symptoms of PTSD. The emotional burden of losing clients is a significant challenge for front-line homelessness staff.

2.4. Stigma and Discrimination Against Clients and Workers

People experiencing homelessness are often subjected to discrimination and societal stigma. They are often perceived as undeserving of help, blamed for their circumstances which creates additional challenges for workers who must advocate for their clients while combating discrimination and negative societal attitudes. In some countries staff have to navigate a landscape where homelessness is being criminalised rather than addressed through adequate social policies.

Impact on Staff

Workers themselves often experience professional stigma, with homelessness work being undervalued and homeless people are often seen as less deserving of support than other groups.

We quite often encounter that the reason for leaving was not money, prestige etc., but the main reason for employees leaving was mental health.

- Jakub, Czech Republic

Without proper mental health resources, it's easy for staff to feel overwhelmed.

- Kamila, Poland

Many staff experience burnout due to the pressure cooker environment—caseloads are high, resources are limited, and clients feel trapped in the system.

- Catherine, Ireland

You absorb a lot of trauma from the people you work with. If you don't take care of your mental health, this job will wear you down.

- Juan Manuel, Spain

Advocating for clients means challenging deeply ingrained biases in society.

- Juliet, United Kingdom

There's frustration because the work is often not recognised. Society sees us as 'good volunteers' rather than professionals.

- Maria Luisa, Italy

Our clients face not just poverty, but judgment from society...Part of our job is educating people—whether it's a landlord, a health service, or the public—about the systemic roots of homelessness.

- Aurelija, Lithuania

2.5. Organisational and Workplace Challenges

Several workplace challenges contribute to staff dissatisfaction and stress, including:

Chronic understaffing

Chronic understaffing in homelessness services places an immense burden on workers, leading to excessive workloads, burnout, and reduced capacity to provide adequate, individualised care.

Inadequate Supervision

Limited access to supervision and other mental health resources leaves staff unsupported.

Physical workspace

Poorly designed or overcrowded spaces hinder staff's ability to decompress and focus.

High Caseloads

Overwhelming workloads reduce the time available to provide individualised care, increasing stress and reducing job satisfaction.

Salary related hardships

Some homelessness workers are impacted by low salaries and the rising cost of housing leading to the need for a secondary job to avoid financial difficulties. They face the dual concerns that their success in helping clients is limited within their professional capacity, due to understaffing and the lack of resources, at the same time as being personally worried about housing costs.

Insufficient Training

A lack of training in trauma-informed care and de-escalation strategies as well as in more specialised issues such as addressing the needs of specific groups such as migrants, women, and youth increases staff vulnerability to stress.

Lack of management training

Insufficient management training can result in ineffective leadership, poor communication, and inconsistent decision-making and workplace conflict and negatively impact staff well-being when employees feel unsupported

Some workers worry that if they ask for help, their workload will be shifted to their colleagues, so they stay silent.
- Catherine, Ireland

Supervision should be about more than checking boxes; it's about processing the emotional side of this work.
- Maria Luisa, Italy

Organisations are being asked to do more with the same or even smaller budgets, while caseloads continue to grow.
- Catherine, Ireland

Financial security matters. Passion for the work isn't enough.
- Kamila, Poland

Workers need to feel valued—not just through words, but structurally. Salaries should reflect the difficulty of the job.
- Alexander, Austria

We promote great caseworkers into management, but we don't always prepare them for leadership. We need better training for new managers.
- Juliet, United Kingdom

Conflict with Clients

Managing aggression or behavioural issues can be emotionally and physically draining.

Boundary Challenges

The need to maintain professional boundaries while building trust with clients and maintaining flexibility is a very difficult skill.

Lack of Peer Support

Insufficient team cohesion or support systems can exacerbate feelings of isolation and stress.

Under-funding of mental health resources

Funding does not prioritise staff well-being. Due to budget constraints, organisations may struggle to provide adequate support for their employees.

Managing conflict is a daily reality in this line of work.
- Jules, the Netherlands

Balancing empathy with boundaries is one of the hardest parts of this job.
- Kristina, Romania

We see staff struggling with boundaries, thinking they should do more, worrying about their clients even outside of work.
- Jules, the Netherlands

When you don't have a strong team to lean on, the work becomes much harder.
- Kjell, Sweden

Funders don't see staff wellbeing as a priority. This needs to change.
- Marthe, France

3. FRONTLINE HOMELESSNESS WORK: KEY STAFF QUALITIES, SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

*Addressing the complex and multifaceted challenges faced by homelessness staff requires specific skills and qualities. **While most participants agree that a formal education in social work, psychology, or related fields provides a strong foundation, many frontline professionals argue that real-world experience, adaptability, and emotional intelligence are just as crucial.** The following qualities as gathered from interviews include professional competencies, personal qualities, and relational skills essential for navigating the unique demands of the work in homelessness services.*

3.1. Diverse Skills and Knowledge

Supporting people experiencing homelessness requires staff to draw on a broad range of knowledge and skills—from social work and mental health to legal systems and healthcare—in order to respond effectively to complex and overlapping challenges.

3.2. Empathy and Compassion

Empathy is universally regarded as a cornerstone of effective homelessness work. Staff must deeply understand and connect with clients.

3.3. Resilience and Emotional Strength

Workers must possess the resilience to navigate frustrations emerging from systemic failures, and to deal with the emotional impact of the work.

A superhero of competencies—knowledge in social work, law, psychology, and medicine.
- Kamila, Poland

Empathy is not just about listening; it's about truly being present with the individual and their struggles.
- Hana, Slovenia

You have to give clients respect. Some have never received it during their whole life.
- Kristina, Romania

Empathy emerged as a critical trait. Respecting individual agency without being patronising is essential.
- Juliet, United Kingdom

Workers must manage emotionally difficult situations and stay composed in crises.
- Bo, Denmark

You need to understand systemic issues like housing markets, mental health, and addiction to truly help.
- Juan Manuel, Spain

3.4. Flexibility and Curiosity

The unpredictability of homelessness work requires staff to adapt quickly to changing circumstances and diverse client needs.

3.5. Boundary Management

Maintaining professional boundaries while fostering trust is critical to prevent burnout and ensure effective relationships with clients.

3.6. Strong Communication and Advocacy Skills

Effective communication is essential for advocating for clients, navigating systemic barriers, and building trust within the team and with external stakeholders.

Pushing for change is quite different from the caring, listening, person-centred aspect. You need to be able to do both.
- Juliet, United Kingdom

Flexibility is key; each day brings new and unexpected challenges.
- Juan Manuel, Spain

This is a very difficult area to work in. People must handle disappointment well and measure success differently.
- Nuno, Portugal

You need to be able to adapt quickly—one moment you're providing emotional support, the next you're navigating bureaucracy, and later you're responding to an emergency situation.
- Aurelija, Lithuania

You deal with a wide range of people—clients, police, judges—so you need to adjust how you communicate depending on who you're speaking to.
- Alexander, Austria

It's important to set professional boundaries while remaining compassionate.
- Kamila, Poland

You're not just working from an office—you're on the streets, in shelters, negotiating with landlords, and advocating in government offices.
- Kristina, Romania

3.7. Teamwork and Collaboration

Effective teamwork and collaboration are essential to provide effective support to clients and to ensure staff wellbeing.

Creating a team with varied skills and perspectives allows for better problem-solving and client support.
– Maria, Greece

Encouraging teamwork and peer support helps mitigate the emotional burden of this work.
– Kjell, Sweden

3.8. Cultural Competence and Inclusivity

Workers must navigate and respect the diverse cultural and gender identities of their clients, ensuring equitable and inclusive support.

Staff need to be sensitive to people's cultural and gender identities, especially when building trust and rapport.
– Kamila, Poland

3.9. Problem-Solving and Creativity

Lack of resources and systemic limitations often require innovative approaches to meet client needs.

3.10. Patience and Persistence

Progress in homelessness work is often slow and requires consistent effort and dedication.

Promoting diversity within teams ensures we reflect the communities we serve.
– Alexander, Austria

3.11. Openness to ask for help

Asking for help is not a weakness, but a vital skill in homelessness work. It shows self-awareness, trust, and a healthy team culture.

When the system fails, you need to become creative.
– Aurelija, Lithuania

You have to think outside the box to find solutions that actually work for clients.
– Bo, Denmark

Small victories, like getting someone to agree to housing, can take weeks or months, but they're worth it.
– Juliet, United Kingdom

Patience and understanding are vital because each individual experiences homelessness differently.
– Nuno, Portugal

A good professional is someone who knows when to ask for help, not someone who tries to solve everything alone. We face really complex situations, and sometimes we need to ask for support. But in some workplace cultures, there's pressure to always appear competent, to never show difficulty, and that's a mistake. We need to create an environment where asking for help is not seen as a weakness, but as a necessary and responsible part of the job.
- Juan Manuel, Spain

3.12. Focus on strengths, hope and meaning

Many staff members stay in the sector because they are motivated by the **meaningful impact of their work**. Helping vulnerable individuals and advocating for social justice keeps them engaged, even in the face of challenges.

People stay because they care deeply. They want to see their clients succeed, even when the system makes it difficult.
- Nuno, Portugal

It can be frustrating to see the system fail people, but at the same time, we see the difference we can make in individual lives.
- Alexander, Austria

It's important to look at the person not just for what is lacking but for their resources. This also applies to staff—it's about focusing on courage and hope to create change.
- Maria Luisa, Italy

4. PROTECTIVE FACTORS THAT SUPPORT HOMELESSNESS STAFF WELLBEING

The challenges and risk factors contributing to staff mental health concerns in the homelessness sector are multifaceted, encompassing individual, systemic, and organisational dimensions. but certain protective factors help safeguard staff mental health and enhance their resilience., Based on in-sights from interviews, these factors include organisational support, personal coping strategies, and team dynamics that foster a sense of safety and empowerment. The following section summarises the key protective factors identified.

4.1. Supportive and nurturing workplace culture: A key protective factor

Trauma-Informed Leadership

Managers who prioritise staff wellbeing and adopt trauma-informed supervision practices play a critical role in fostering a supportive environment.

Recognition and Appreciation

Recognition of staff contributions and celebrating successes fosters a sense of value and accomplishment and plays a crucial role in maintaining morale because frontline staff often feels disconnected from the larger organisational structures. Recognition and acknowledgement can take different forms from personalised gestures (birthday cards) to formal awards (nominating staff for awards)

Focus on Strength

A strengths-based approach within the workplace helps staff feel valued for their capabilities rather than defined by difficulties.

Connection to Organisational Ethos and Core Values

Staff who feel their values align with the organisation's goals are more likely to experience job satisfaction, find pride and meaning in their jobs and maintain their emotional resilience. Frontline workers in the homelessness sector often cite a strong connection to their core values and organisational ethos as a significant protective factor supporting their mental health and resilience and provides a sense of purpose, fosters motivation, and strengthens commitment, even in the face of systemic barriers and emotional challenges. Leadership has a role in creating an environment where staff feel supported and aligned with the organisation's mission.

Good leadership makes all the difference. Knowing that your manager understands the emotional toll of this work is crucial.
– Maria, Greece

Even small gestures of appreciation remind us that our work matters.
– Juliet, United Kingdom

Look at the person's resources rather than just their deficits; this empowers both staff and clients.
– Maria Luisa, Italy

Supervision and Reflective Practice

Opportunities for staff to engage in reflective practice allow them to process their emotions and gain perspective on challenging situations.

Work-Life Balance

Flexible scheduling, reasonable caseloads, and policies that encourage taking breaks contribute to reducing burnout.

Freedom to express opinions your voice is heard and valued

A truly supportive workplace encourages open communication, where staff feel safe to voice concerns, share ideas, and seek help without fear of judgment.

Supervision and trauma counselling should be standard, not optional.

- Boróka, Hungary

Regular supervision ensures staff feel supported and helps address stress before it becomes overwhelming.

- Maria Luisa, Italy

These sessions help staff step back, see things from a different perspective, and prevent emotional overload.

-Marthe, France

We emphasise that employees work 8 hours and that's it. They're encouraged to disconnect completely—don't check emails or work phones after hours.

- Juliet, United Kingdom

It's crucial to create a culture where asking for help is seen as a strength, not a weakness.

- Maria Luisa, Italy

We allow remote work and flexible hours where possible, so staff don't feel trapped in rigid schedules.

- Kamila, Poland

The ideal workplace is one where staff can express their fears and ideas openly, and where the organisation is willing to adapt and change.

- Boróka, Hungary

There is a culture among employees who dare to bring up their own challenges and those of their colleagues.

- Harri, Finland

4.2. Team Cohesion and Peer Support

Collaborative Work Environment

Strong teamwork and open communication create a sense of shared purpose and mutual support.

Management knowledge of staff

Management should know their staff to understand and actively engage with their teams.

Peer Support Networks - sense of belonging to a community

Informal peer networks provide spaces for staff to share experiences and coping strategies, reducing feelings of isolation.

Safe and Inclusive Spaces

Teams that prioritise equality, diversity, and inclusion create a safe environment where staff feel respected and understood.

When 20 to 25 people work together, challenges will naturally arise. However, rather than criticising each other, it is crucial to take a step back and ask, How can I support you? How can I help build trust so that you feel safe to share difficulties?
- Bo, Denmark

Pairing staff for complex cases, both as a way to ensure better support for clients and as a protective factor for staff to share responsibilities and reduce emotional strain.
- Hana, Slovenia

You have to make sure everyone's on board and give them the support they need from the organisation.
- Kjell, Sweden

A small thing, like starting meetings by asking how everyone is feeling, could help.
- Aurelija, Lithuania

We often debrief with each other after tough cases, which helps lighten the load.
- Hana, Slovenia

Our team celebrates diversity, and that sense of belonging is a huge support.
- Alexander, Austria

4.3. Training and Development

Trauma-Informed Care Training

Providing staff with tools to manage trauma and challenging client behaviours enhances their confidence and reduces stress.

Ongoing Professional Development

Opportunities to grow professionally and take on new challenges motivate and keep staff.

Connecting to a wider community: participation in international and European events

Connecting with others working in the field creates a shared mission and strengthens motivation.

4.4. Personal Coping Strategies

Boundary Management

Staff who maintain clear boundaries between work and personal life report better mental health outcomes.

Self-Care Practices

Activities like mindfulness, exercise, and hobbies help staff decompress and maintain balance.

Organisations that have done the work to become trauma-informed are generally better at supporting staff.

– Catherine, Ireland

Seeing my own progress and having space for professional growth makes the challenges of this job feel more meaningful.

– Aurelija, Lithuania

Staff who have opportunities to transition into training roles, policy work, or leadership positions are more likely to stay long-term.

– Bo, Denmark

We participate in regular training, both locally and at the national or European level, to help staff develop skills and stay connected.

– Juan Manuel, Spain

Switching off for a while, stop being in relationship mode, instead doing things with our hands during our shift, like washing dishes.

– Jakub, Czech Republic

Taking time every week to disconnect and focus on one's health keeps them grounded.

– Marthe, France

We need to talk about boundaries openly and without judgment. It's crucial to understand that staff may sometimes cross boundaries or struggle to set them, and not judge them for it. People need to reflect openly on these situations without fear of judgment; otherwise, they'll stop reflecting and hide their mistakes.

– Hana, Slovenia

Finding pride, meaning and satisfaction in their jobs

Purpose and meaning in the work helps staff remain motivated to keep working in the homelessness sector.

4.5. Physical workspaces

Frontline workers benefit from workspaces that allow reflection, peer support, and self-care to manage the emotional demands of their work.

Comfortable and Supportive Workspace

Calm, clean, and bright environments enhance staff well-being.

Time for Breaks and Decompression

Ensuring staff have time and space for breaks reduces stress and enable recharge.

Staff created a small break area. It provides a space where they can pause, talk with coworkers, or take time away without being disturbed.
– Hana, Slovenia

You know that you make a difference in people's lives. Even when it's small, but I think the main thing is the passion to help.
– Aurelija, Lithuania

Even if it feels hopeless, knowing that our organisation is fighting for better policies gives us a sense of purpose.
– Marthe, France

For some, it's not just a job—it's part of their identity. There's a sense of being part of something unique.
– Boróka, Hungary

Seeing even small improvements in a client's life reminds me why I do this work.
– Juliet, United Kingdom

Management encourages staff to take breaks, which helps staff reset and avoid burnout.
– Bo, Denmark

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAFF WELLBEING IN HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

To ensure staff wellbeing and sustain effective service delivery, organisations must implement targeted strategies that foster a supportive and trauma-informed work environment. These recommendations, gathered from the interviews emphasise a holistic approach that addresses individual, team, and systemic needs.

Recommendation 1: Ensure Sufficient Staffing Levels

The foundation of staff wellbeing is adequate staffing to maintain a trauma-informed and safe service. Understaffing increases stress, burnout, and risks to both staff and service users. Organisations should:

- Assess workloads and staffing ratios regularly to ensure sufficient resources.
- Implement workforce planning strategies that prevent excessive overtime and burnout.
- Advocate for funding to sustain appropriate staffing levels.

Recommendation 2: Prioritise Psychological and Physical Safety

Psychological Safety

Creating an environment where staff feel safe to express concerns, seek help, and provide feedback without fear of repercussions is essential. Organisations should:

- Train staff and leaders on psychological safety and its role in team dynamics.
- Promote a culture of open dialogue, ensuring all staff voices are valued.

Reflective Practice

Regular opportunities for reflection help staff process challenges, build resilience, and enhance self-awareness. Organisations should:

- Integrate reflective practice into team routines.
- Ensure managers actively participate in and encourage these sessions.

Addressing Vicarious Trauma

Given the nature of homelessness services, staff are at risk of vicarious trauma. To mitigate its effects, organisations should:

- Integrate discussions on trauma and burnout into team meetings and supervision.
- Provide training on recognising trauma signs and developing coping strategies.
- Adapt sickness and absence policies to acknowledge the impact of trauma.

Physical Safety

Ensuring a physically safe work environment is equally crucial. Organisations should:

- Implement and enforce policies that safeguard staff from physical harm.
- Train staff in incident management and ensure debriefing mechanisms are in place.
- Design workplace environments that promote calmness and wellbeing through appropriate lighting, colours, plants, and comfortable spaces.

Recommendation 3: Staff Empowerment

Staff who are involved in shaping policies and procedures feel more valued and motivated. Organisations should:

- Create formal and informal avenues for staff input on service decisions.
- Provide anonymous feedback mechanisms for those less comfortable speaking openly.
- Regularly update staff on how their feedback influences changes.

Ensuring Role Clarity

Unclear roles can contribute to stress and inefficiency. Organisations should provide clear, regularly reviewed job descriptions (e.g., every six months in supervision sessions).

Promoting Organisational Transparency

Transparency fosters trust and stability within teams. Organisations should communicate regularly about finances, strategic changes, and service planning.

Work Life balance

Organisations should have clear policies to prevent overwork, like encouraging staff to completely disconnect during their time off, including wellbeing days.

Recommendation 4: Fostering a Trauma-Informed Organisational Culture

Enhancing Team Cohesion

Supportive teams reduce burnout and increase resilience. Organisations should:

- Use team meetings and supervision sessions to discuss wellbeing, vicarious trauma, and burnout.
- Develop peer support networks to encourage shared problem-solving and mutual support.

- Provide trauma-informed training and reflective practice for managers, helping them lead effectively.

Trauma-Informed Supervision

Supervision should go beyond performance management to acknowledge and address trauma exposure. Organisations should:

- Ensure supervisors are trained in trauma-informed approaches.
- Allocate sufficient funding for regular training, supervision, and reflective practice.

Managing Professional Boundaries

Balancing compassionate client relationships with professional boundaries is critical. Organisations should:

- Provide training on maintaining healthy boundaries.
- Encourage non-judgmental conversations about boundary challenges during supervision.

Recommendation 5: Promote Staff Development and Training

- Use strengths-based approaches in staff appraisals to foster growth.
- Offer ongoing training opportunities to enhance staff confidence, competence, and engagement.

Recommendation 6: Embed a Strong Wellbeing Framework

A structured approach to wellbeing ensures that support is embedded in everyday practice. Organisations should:

- Develop clear policies to support staff wellbeing, including dedicated funding.
- Address barriers to reflective practice and wellness activities, such as time constraints.
- Promote self-care behaviours, ensuring staff take breaks and time off without guilt.
- Enable access to counselling, psychotherapy, and other support services.

Recommendation 7: Address Diversity, Inclusion, and Gender Sensitivity

- Train staff on how identity, gender, and unconscious bias impact service delivery.
- Encourage diversity in teams and actively discuss representation and bias in reflective practice.
- Adopt a gender-sensitive approach to mental health and wellbeing, recognising that a gender-neutral stance can overlook risks faced by women workers.

CONCLUSION

Frontline homelessness workers operate in environments of high emotional demand and significant stress, making their mental health and wellbeing a critical policy and practice issue. This report highlights the need for clear, trauma-informed support structures that foster resilience and wellbeing at both the individual and organisational levels. Supporting staff wellbeing is not a secondary goal, but a fundamental requirement for sustaining effective services and achieving the broader goal of ending homelessness. If staff wellbeing is not prioritised, burnout and high turnover will jeopardise service effectiveness and worsen the homelessness crisis.

The Urgent Need for Investment in Staff Wellbeing

Interviews conducted for this report revealed challenges such as low pay, high staff turnover, and lack of resources, all of which directly impact staff morale and service quality. Many participants emphasised that current funding structures often fail to allocate sufficient resources for staff support, leaving organisations struggling to provide the mental health and wellbeing interventions their employees need. Advocating for increased investment in staff wellbeing—through both policy change and financial support—is therefore essential to ensure that workforce stays in the sector.

The Lisbon Declaration's commitment to ending homelessness in Europe by 2030 can only be achieved with the full engagement of a well-supported workforce and with proper investment in staff mental health, burnout prevention, and workplace wellbeing.

Beyond Individual Responsibility: The Role of Organisational Culture

This report stresses that staff wellbeing should not be treated as an individual responsibility alone. While self-care strategies, supervision, and peer support are valuable tools, the broader focus must be on transforming organisational cultures and working conditions to proactively prevent stress, trauma, and burnout.

A holistic, trauma-informed approach to staff wellbeing means embedding support systems into the very structure of an organisation, rather than reacting to crises as they arise. Both Trauma Informed Care and Psychologically Informed Environments commit to ongoing staff training, reflective practice, and clinical supervision, ensuring that wellbeing is prioritised in a proactive and preventative way rather than as a reactive policy following incidents or extreme pressure periods.

A Call to Action: Embedding Trauma-Informed Wellbeing in Homelessness Services

Trauma-informed wellbeing is not a single intervention but an ongoing process—a way of working that must be deeply ingrained in organisational policies and priorities and funding decisions. A supportive workplace culture ensures that workers do not feel blamed or labelled “inadequate for the job” when facing emotional challenges but instead feel valued and empowered to navigate their roles effectively.

Additionally, support for homelessness staff should not be confined to their organisations alone—it requires broader acknowledgment and action from government bodies, funding agencies, and the wider community.

By integrating trauma-informed and psychologically informed approaches, organisations can create safer, healthier workplaces where staff feel supported, engaged, and empowered. A well-supported workforce leads to better service delivery and improved client outcomes.

This report serves as a call to action—to policymakers, funders, and service providers—to prioritise staff wellbeing as an essential component of homelessness services. By embedding these principles into policy, practice, and funding structures we can ensure staff wellbeing, retention, and service quality.

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ANNEX: PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR STAFF SUPPORT - BEST PRACTICES

Critical Incident Debriefing (CID)

Critical Incident Debriefing (CID) is a structured process designed to support individuals and teams who have experienced a traumatic or high-stress event. The primary goal is to mitigate the psychological impact of such incidents by providing a safe space for participants to express their feelings, share experiences, and receive professional guidance.

Debriefing after critical incidents is crucial as it allows time to debrief for processing the workplace event and reducing psychological distress and prevent burnout among staff. Engaging in debriefing has many benefits including helping staff process emotions, learning from experiences, and improve future responses to similar situations.

Debriefing methods can be:

- **Shift Reflections:** informal discussions at the end of a shift where staff share experiences and feelings or
- **Structured Group Processes:** formal sessions guided by trained facilitators to discuss incidents in depth.

Implementing a debriefing process involves several key components:

- **Timing:** Conducting the debriefing within a specific timeframe after the incident to ensure relevance and effectiveness.
- **Structure:** Following a structured format that allows participants to discuss their experiences, emotions, and reactions in a guided manner.
- **Facilitation:** Engaging trained professionals or facilitators who can manage the process, provide support, and offer coping strategies.
- **Follow-up:** Providing ongoing support and monitoring to address any emerging psychological needs.

Structured Mentorship and peer support networks

Mentorship in organisations is a dynamic and evolving process that can contribute to a very effective a positive organisational culture. It can be a structured process or an informal relationship.

In formal mentorship programmes experienced individuals (mentors) guide and support new or less experienced employees (mentees) in their professional and personal development. Participants are matched with mentors to discuss challenges, seek advice, and work towards personal and organisational goals, benefiting from their mentor's skills and expertise.

In informal programs, every worker is paired with one mentor and the workers themselves select whom they want to engage with in mentorship. The name of their mentors is written down, but it can be changed any time. Regular check-ins are scheduled (at least weekly) to discuss challenges of the work and providing a structured space for emotional and professional support.

Mentorship structures bring numerous benefits for the organisations which include a proactive mental health monitoring and building a sense of community and connection because workers learn to watch out for each other.

Mindfulness Practices

Mindfulness practices have been increasingly recognised as effective tools for enhancing staff well-being in homelessness services. By fostering present-moment awareness and non-judgmental acceptance, mindfulness can help staff manage stress, prevent burnout, and improve their interactions with clients.

- **Understanding Mindfulness:** Mindfulness involves paying deliberate, non-judgmental attention to the present moment. This practice helps individuals become more aware of their thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations, fostering a deeper understanding of their internal experiences.
- **Grounding Exercises:** There are simple grounding techniques that can be easily incorporated into daily routines and can be practiced during breaks or before shifts to centre oneself. These exercises assist in anchoring attention to the present, reducing the tendency to ruminate on past events or worry about future scenarios.
- **Application in Daily Life:** By integrating mindfulness into everyday activities, staff can manage stress more effectively. This approach enhances emotional resilience, enabling individuals to respond to challenging situations with greater clarity and composure. Additionally, adopting mindful listening and communication techniques can enhance interactions with clients, fostering a more compassionate and effective service environment.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice plays a critical role in enhancing the wellbeing of staff, providing a structured approach to evaluating experiences, interactions, and professional challenges. It involves regular self-reflection, allowing individuals or teams to assess:

What went well?

What could be improved?

How can these insights be applied in the future?

By engaging in ongoing reflection, staff develop self-awareness, refine their skills, and strengthen their professional growth, leading to better emotional resilience and decision-making.

Why is Reflective Practice Essential in Homelessness Services?

Homelessness workers operate in emotionally demanding environments, often dealing with clients who have experienced complex trauma. Without reflection, these experiences can lead to stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue. By critically evaluating their interactions, staff can:

- Gain insights into their emotional responses and behaviours.
- Reduce stress and prevent burnout by processing difficult situations.
- Improve their approach to client care and emotional regulation.
- Develop a greater sense of agency, confidence, and problem-solving ability.

How Does Reflective Practice Work?

Reflective practice can be conducted individually or in groups, using various models and techniques. Two widely used frameworks include:

- **Gibbs' Reflective Cycle:** Encourages structured reflection by analysing experiences step by step (Description → Feelings → Evaluation → Analysis → Conclusion → Action Plan).
- **Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle:** A continuous learning process that promotes reflection through experience, observation, conceptualisation, and experimentation.

Facilitators, often external psychotherapists or experienced professionals, guide these sessions to help staff explore their emotions in a safe, supportive environment.

Benefits of Reflective Practice for Homelessness Staff:

- Reduces burnout and emotional exhaustion by offering a safe space to process challenges.
- Improves team dynamics and problem-solving through shared learning and discussion.
- Enhances client outcomes by refining staff approaches to care and support.
- Strengthens professional confidence, reducing feelings of helplessness or moral distress.

Self-Care Essentials for Health and Well-Being

The Self-Care Essentials for Health and Well-Being training, offered by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, is designed for housing, support, and community workers in the homelessness sector. It aims to equip staff with practical skills to manage their own well-being. It focuses on building personalised self-care practices to promote overall well-being. The training includes eight lessons that cover topics such as mindfulness, stress relief, self-compassion, establishing healthy boundaries, and increasing resilience.

Participants learn to:

- Set personalised self-care goals
- Improve self-awareness
- Establish and maintain healthy habits
- Practice relaxation, deep breathing, and self-compassion
- Set boundaries for healthier relationships
- Increase life satisfaction and resilience

The training covers **several key themes** designed to help individuals working in homelessness services take care of their **mental, emotional, and physical health**:

Personalised Self-Care Plans

- Participants are guided through creating their own self-care plan, tailored to their specific needs and life circumstances.
- Emphasis is placed on recognising the importance of individual self-care practices and how these can be integrated into daily life.

Mindfulness

- Mindfulness practices are introduced to help staff focus on the present moment, manage stress, and prevent burnout.
- Techniques such as deep breathing, body scans, and mindful observation are discussed to cultivate awareness and emotional regulation.

Stress Relief Techniques

- Practical exercises and tips for managing workplace stress are shared, helping individuals to reduce tension and build resilience.
- This includes learning to recognise early signs of stress and implementing effective strategies like relaxation techniques.

Self-Compassion

- The training encourages developing a compassionate mindset towards oneself, especially in high-stress roles.
- Participants learn to treat themselves with the same kindness and understanding they would offer to a friend, helping to reduce feelings of guilt or inadequacy.

Boundaries and Balance

- One of the key themes involves setting and maintaining healthy boundaries, both in professional and personal life.
- Practical strategies for recognising when boundaries are being crossed and how to assertively maintain them to preserve mental health are covered.

Resilience Building

- Sessions focus on building resilience, which is crucial for staff in challenging environments like homelessness services.
- Techniques for fostering emotional strength, coping with setbacks, and learning from difficult experiences are included.

Life Satisfaction and Well-being

- The training covers broader themes of life satisfaction, encouraging participants to reflect on their goals, values, and what brings them fulfilment.
- Tools to improve overall well-being, such as setting long-term goals, identifying passions, and practicing gratitude, are also explored.
- These sessions aim to equip staff with practical skills to manage their own well-being while supporting the well-being of others in demanding and emotionally charged roles.

Smaller or bigger actions that matter

It is essential for organisations to create an environment where employees feel valued and recognised. Even small actions can have a big impact on staff morale, well-being, and overall job satisfaction. Here are some practical ways organisations can show appreciation for their staff:

Regular Team Meetings and Check-ins:

- Holding regular one-to-one and team meetings to discuss challenges, achievements, and offer recognition for efforts.
- Creating open forums, where staff can share their experiences and feel heard.

Public Acknowledgment and Appreciation:

- Recognising staff contributions during team meetings or internal newsletters to celebrate individual and team successes.
- Celebrating milestones or achievements, such as successfully housing clients or work anniversaries in the organisation.

Access to Professional Development:

- Offering tailored training sessions to enhance their skills and boost confidence, such as resilience training.

Flexible Work Arrangements:

- Providing options for sabbaticals or flexible working hours which can reduce stress and improve work-life balance.

Peer Networks and Community Building:

- Encouraging informal networks or peer groups where colleagues can share experiences and offer mutual support.
- Organising professional gatherings, conferences and forums to foster a sense of community and belonging.

Employee Assistance Programs:

- Offering external counselling services or mental health support lines to demonstrate care for staff well-being.

Small Acts of Recognition:

- Simple gestures such as thank-you notes for hard work, or team celebrations for collective successes can make workers feel appreciated.

Opportunities for Growth:

- Supporting staff in career development by offering pathways for promotions or opportunities to take on leadership roles.

Symbolic Incentives:

- Providing small things like vouchers, team lunches, subscriptions for music or films streaming websites or newspapers, or a shiatsu massage also show gratitude for their work.

Strength-Based Practices for Reviewing Staff Performance and Development

Strength-based practices for reviewing staff performance and development focus on identifying, leveraging, and developing an individual's strengths, talents, and capabilities rather than primarily addressing weaknesses or gaps. By focusing on what individuals do best, organisations not only improve performance but also create a culture where employees feel valued, motivated, and empowered to grow. By empowerment through positive reinforcement, employees gain confidence in their abilities and are encouraged to take ownership. This approach encourages employees to maximise their potential, increases motivation, and fosters a positive work environment that supports growth and resilience.

To make this approach effective, organisations must embed it into their culture and systems. For instance, by holding frequent one to one meetings beyond the annual reviews or by introducing peer recognition programs where employees can recognise and celebrate each other's strength (e.g. written acknowledgement in newsletters). These practices can promote collaboration by highlighting diversity and fostering mutual appreciation and trust among team members.

Supervision and Support

Structured, consistent and predictable one-on-one or team supervision sessions are essential to help staff discuss challenges and the emotional impact of the work and process difficult work experiences in a non-judgmental and psychologically safe environment. Participation should be compulsory and integrated into the working hours.

It is important the supervisors have in depth knowledge of the sector (e.g., client complexities systemic barriers, trauma-informed care,) and empathy for frontline challenges. Supervision should be tailored to address the specific challenges workers face depending on whether they work in shared accommodation or in Housing First, e.g., a focus on group conflict and empowerment in community housing, and emotional intensity and boundary-setting of the one-to-one relationships with clients in Housing First programmes.

Supervisors – usually external professionals- should be able to recognise signs of burnout or compassion fatigue and provide resources and opportunities for recovery.

Well-being days

Well-being days are designed to help staff manage the emotional and psychological demands of working with vulnerable populations. They are intended to prevent burnout, help staff to recharge, and address the stress caused by increasing workloads, complex cases, and emotionally taxing events like client deaths or violence.

Organisations play a key role in fostering a supportive environment for wellbeing days. This includes encouraging staff to disconnect and offering flexibility in scheduling. Younger or newer workers may struggle to make full use of wellbeing days because they feel obligated to their clients or feel guilty about prioritising their needs or worry about appearing less committed. A supportive organisational culture is essential to ensure that staff feel comfortable taking these days without fear of judgment or stigma.

The Breathing Room: a space to process grief and loss (online)

The Breathing room run by the Museum of Homelessness, which has been recognised for its efforts in providing spaces for collective grieving and play a crucial role in honouring and remembering individuals who have died while homeless.

The Breathing room is an online facilitated space to talk about grief, loss and dying. Everyone is welcome, but the sessions are designed for people working in paid or unpaid roles supporting people who are experiencing homelessness, addiction, and similar struggles.

Each session begins with a few moments of quiet reflection and an invitation to listen to each other. In addition, people are asked to agree not to share what is discussed after the session. There is no focus on certain topics and there are no guest speakers to The Breathing Room, rather each session is shaped by what people in the room want to talk about.

To make sure the space is welcoming, and everyone has the chance to share, each session is limited to a maximum of twenty participants.

ENDNOTES

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**European Federation of National Organisations
Working with the Homeless**

194 Chaussée de Louvain, 1210 Brussels,
Belgium

T +32 (0)2 538 66 69 • information@feantsa.org

www.feantsa.org

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