

Frontline Worker Wellness and Retention

HRI 2025

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My burnout story



Causes

5 years of devastatingly
traumatic frontline work

working 2-3 jobs at a
time

pandemic, housing crisis,
OD crisis, rise of fascism

losing dozens of people
at home and at work



Effects

Constant dissociation,
exhaustion

Chaotic drug use

Unable to have hobbies,
interests, relationships

Physical illness (stress
ulcers, fainting, infected
sores, rapid weight loss and
gain)

Eventually leaving the work

Why should harm reduction organizations take action to prevent burnout?

Nature of our work

Constant crises +
witnessing and
experiencing trauma
+ heavy workloads +
low wages +
minimal benefits =
high rates of
burnout!



Quality of care

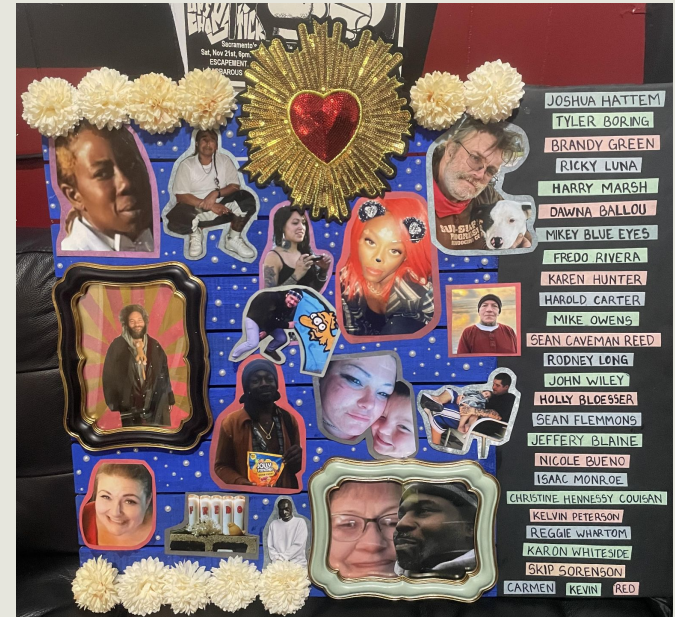
Harm reduction is all
about trust and
relationships and
requires a lot of field
specific expertise.

Social justice

It is irresponsible to
hire marginalized
people for traumatic
work without caring
for their wellbeing.

Causes of Burnout

1. Workload
2. Perceived lack of control
3. Lack of reward or recognition
4. Poor relationships
5. Lack of fairness
6. Values mismatch
7. Trauma



Where “self care” fails

What managers think happens after telling workers to “practice self care”:



- Frames burnout as the problem of the worker
- Shifts responsibility away from real causes of burnout: workplace policies and culture
- Trivializes devastating levels of grief and trauma
- Makes people spend personal time recovering from work
- “Self care” often costs money
- Isolates people during times of trauma
- People experiencing burnout are often unable to engage in “self care”

What allowed me to continue in the work:

- Offered a job at an organization where worker wellness and liberatory harm reduction were foundational values
- Together we transitioned the organization into a non hierarchical worker led organization
- Money

yuba harm



reduction collective

Serving Grass Valley & Nevada City

Wages and benefits



Resource:
MIT Living Wage Calculator
(US based)

1. All staff are salaried and paid the same rate
2. Pay is above living wage
3. Unlimited paid time off (that we actually use!)
4. Wellness stipend
5. Phone bill stipend
6. Car repair stipend
7. Commute is part of the workday
8. Volunteers are paid

Balanced Workload



Resources:

1. Capacity Collective (for data support)
2. Jitasa (for nonprofit accounting support in USA)

1. Four day workweek (still paid for five)
2. Maximum of 3 direct service shifts a week (max 1 full day)
3. Made a list of all tasks and divided them up as a group
4. Flexible hybrid work schedule
5. Weekly check in about workload
6. Budget to hire outside help if some aspect of the work is becoming overwhelming (eg accounting, data)
7. Constant trainings and professional development
8. Cross training to allow people to take breaks

Culture



Resources:

1. Lisa Marie Alatorre
lisamariealatorre@gmail.com
2. Transformative Justice Help
Desk (Interrupting Criminalization)

1. Hired restorative justice practitioner Lisa Marie Alatorre to do circles, mediation, culture evaluation, and accountability and restorative justice training
2. Worked with Shira Hassan to create a policy for responding to sexual harassment on outreach and creating a culture free from sexual and gender based violence and discrimination
3. Intentional spaces for joy: Dungeons and Dragons group
4. Appreciation: Shoutouts, saying thank you
5. Open discussions about drug use, accommodations made
6. Self managed work day (nobody is monitoring when you clock in or out)
7. Very clear values statement (eg not working with police, anti-professionalization statement)
8. Ability to make mistakes and say you don't know

Power Distribution



Resource:

Worker Self-Directed Nonprofits
Toolkit from Sustainable Law
Economies Center

1. Worker-led non hierarchical organization
2. All group decisions are made using the fist to five consensus model
3. Individuals can make decisions over their scope of work
4. No at-will employment

The Fist to Five Voting Method

On the count of 1-2-3, everyone simultaneously raises a fist with 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 fingers extended to express how you feel about the decision.



No way. I don't support this decision and I am vetoing.

I have strong reservations but will support the decision and will not veto.

I am uncomfortable with the decision but can live with it.

This decision is okay with me.

I support this decision.

I strongly support this decision.

Lessons Learned

- Don't let people tell you that it "sounds nice but doesn't work in practice"
- Don't center worker policies based on the worst imaginable worker. Imagine how you want good workers to be treated.
- Worker retention costs money. Prioritize fewer positions with better benefits when writing grants.
- Manageable workloads may mean less services. That's okay.

**Preventing burnout is
the responsibility of
the organization, not
individual workers**