

SUPPORTING STAFF DURING COVID-19

Cities around the world are challenged with the need to continue essential city services during a time of crisis. Homeless services are an important part of a city's responsibility, and a healthy, motivated workforce is necessary to provide those services. Therefore, it is critical to enact policies and practices to support the workforce, ease fear and anxiety, and keep staff morale high. Outlined below are best practices garnered from our participating cities describing how to find, maintain, and support this key workforce.

Bowery Residents' Committee (BRC)

BRC, a non-profit organization serving New York City's homeless population, quickly understood that it would be challenging to retain their current operational systems and structures as they respond to the pandemic. Its workforce is comprised nearly entirely of direct service workers for whom working from home is not a viable option and for whom experience and motivation are significant aspects of their work.

- **Flexibility:** During the first weeks of the shelter-in-place order, absenteeism at BRC reached up to 50% during some shifts. BRC did not demand that people return to work, but instead engendered good will by collaborating quickly with labor unions to make 3 changes:
 1. Adjusting the usual 5-day, 7.5-hour-shift work week to a 3-day work week with 12-hour shifts. This reduces travel time (and exposure) for workers, makes it easier to manage home-life circumstances, and provides a more efficient use of personal protective equipment (PPE).
 2. Offering a liberal interpretation of paid time off: "If you need to use it, use it."
 3. Granting all employees, including over 200 new hires, access to their full number of annual sick leave hours in advance and permitting them to sign up for benefits immediately.
- **Communication:** Communication is an enormous part of assuring staff and maintaining clear and safe environments for staff and clients. Initially during COVID-19, BRC increased electronic communications, but found that it was not effective in engaging workers. The organization then created a 3-times-per-week, 1-page staff newsletter, *BRC Strong*. Each issue provides information about relevant topics, such as changes in employee benefits, where to access food, and how to keep spaces clean.
- **Engagement:** BRC also created a workplace challenge. As social distancing limited the number of people in each elevator, they created a stair challenge in which employees receive gift cards for climbing a certain number of stairs.

Houston Case Study

Houston named operational staffing as the city's biggest current challenge. The entire network, and especially those employees working with the homeless population, is paralyzed with fear of the virus. Houston first looked to private sector emergency response teams to staff hotels, but was met with elusively high daily costs for staff roles that did not require specialized skills. Instead, the city chose to focus on easing the fears and concerns of their new and existing staff by hosting regular webinars with public health officials.

San Francisco Case Study

The city's Emergency Response System, usually enacted for earthquakes or fire emergencies, has been extremely helpful in filling the gaps in emergency response and staff absenteeism. The system manages city employees who work in emergency response; the terms of employment were pre-negotiated between the city, staff, and labor unions. However, between absenteeism and balancing the health needs and concerns of staff, the pool of workers willing or able to be called to action decreased over time. To find and maintain staff, the city:

- **Looked to non-profits** across the Bay Area to serve essentially as staffing agencies during the crisis. Non-profit organizations, many of whom were facing significant loss of contracts and budget cuts, nominated their own staff and coordinated workers from across the region to meet needs.
- **Focused on training** and other support for emergency workers. Particularly for roles in homeless services, the city organized trainings for non-expert staff, established communication tools, and created an "ambassador" program, grouping experts with non-experts. These efforts helped emergency workers feel more confident and secure in their roles.

Seattle Case Study

- **Continuity Planning:** At the start of the pandemic, Seattle found itself in a fortunate position when it came to the coordination of staff in emergency situations. Last Fall, the city conducted continuity planning based on work from the H1N1 virus. One key aspect of this city-wide planning was categorizing city employee roles. Categories 1 and 2 were deemed essential roles for the city in times of crisis, and all other employee roles were deemed eligible for reassignment.
- **Public Health and Technical Support:** The County Public Health Department staffs a team that provides 24-hour support for service providers across the county with COVID-related questions. The team advises on topics such as how to keep spaces clean, when a client or staff member may need medical assistance, and when it is necessary to quarantine.

Notes on Child Care

Finding and procuring open, safe childcare during COVID-19 is a significant challenge. However, the problem lies not with the supply of childcare providers, but with connecting these providers to those in need of care.

- Childcare centers do pose a public health challenge, but are essential services and precautions need to be made.
- Federal relief money is available to subsidize childcare for essential workers. Additionally, in attempt to ensure that childcare centers do not go out of business, much of their underlying funding is still flowing, despite a sharp decrease in enrollment.
- Each state is meeting this challenge differently. Some states are distributing additional funds (hazard pay essentially) to care centers that remain open, and other states are redefining who qualifies for subsidy (e.g. low income parents and essential workers).
- It is important to understand how your state is addressing this issue, defining or redefining qualifications for subsidy, and identifying how services are being coordinated.

Key Takeaways and Considerations

- **Be Flexible:** In order to meet the needs of their employees, non-profit providers may need to offer additional support or make changes in processes/procurement even when contracts are in place. This could include providing cash upfront for services and mobilizing supply chains for PPE and cleaning supplies, etc.
- **Motivate:** Employees are also going through this pandemic and are not immune to the fear and anxiety it creates. Providers can employ tactics to keep workers motivated during this crisis.
- **Educate and Communicate:** Sharing clear and comprehensible information is crucial to address the fears and concerns of staff.