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## Solving the Staffing Crisis Facing NYC's Human Services Organizations

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Human services nonprofit organizations are critical to New York City's functioning and well-being, delivering the lion's share of safety net services to vulnerable New Yorkers. The sector also faces a staffing crisis that directly threatens its ability to deliver these much-needed services. The average human services nonprofit has more than 15 percent of its positions vacant, as well as unsustainably high levels of staff turnover.

by Melissa Lent

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Human services nonprofit organizations have become more critical than ever to New York City's functioning and well-being. These nonprofits deliver the lion's share of safety net services to vulnerable New Yorkers. They have stepped up again and again in recent years to meet the challenges of multiple crises, from an unprecedented pandemic to the largest wave of immigration in a century to rising rates of poverty, food insecurity, homelessness, and mental illness. But today, New York's human services sector also faces a huge challenge that directly affects its ability to deliver these much-needed services to millions of New Yorkers: a staffing crisis in which the average human services nonprofit has more than 15 percent of its positions vacant, as well as unsustainably high levels of staff turnover.

Of the 27 major human services organizations that shared vacancy data with the Center for an Urban Future between August and October 2023, 18 had a vacancy rate of 15 percent or more, and seven had a vacancy rate of at least 20 percent. Vacancy rates for frontline positions—such as cooks, residential aides at shelters, nursing assistants and social workers—were even higher, often topping 40 percent. Among the 19 organizations that shared information on employee turnover, about half had a turnover rate consistently over 35 percent in the past year.<sup>1</sup>

For example, the nonprofit The Children's Village provides vital services to 20,000 children, including foster youth and immigrant children who were separated from their parents, had 363 staff vacancies—more than a quarter of its current active staffing level of 1,400. The Bowery Residents' Committee, which annually provides shelter and housing for 10,000 homeless

people, had over 300 vacancies, nearly a quarter of its current 1,300 staff total. Meanwhile, Covenant House, which provides vital services to homeless youth, experienced a staff turnover rate of roughly 50 percent in the previous fiscal year. And Acacia Network, one of the largest Hispanic-led nonprofits in the city, had a 43 percent turnover rate in the same period, meaning they hired 1,400 employees and lost 1,100—the majority of which were in its homelessness services portfolio.

In recent years, there has been considerable attention paid to city government's own staffing challenges, and the Adams administration has launched several initiatives aimed at bolstering city government staffing. But our research suggests that human services organizations have an even harder problem filling open positions. Across the 27 human services nonprofits we surveyed, the average staff vacancy rate was 15.6 percent. In contrast, a December 2022 report from the office of Comptroller Brad Lander found that the staff vacancy rate for city government agencies was just under 8 percent. Agencies that provide services similar to those of human services nonprofits also had rates well under 15 percent; for example, the staff vacancy rate was 7.8 percent at The Department of Education, 11.4 percent at the Department of Homeless Services and 12 percent at the Administration for Children's Services as of October 2022.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, our analysis of job posting data from labor market analytics firm Lightcast reveals that the sector's staffing shortages have gotten significantly worse since before the pandemic. The social assistance sector overall had 17,402 open jobs from January to December 2023, a 20.3 percent jump from 2019 (14,466 postings), and also an alarmingly high turnover rate of 58 percent.<sup>3</sup>

The high staff vacancy and turnover rates that New York's human services organizations grapple with have a deeply human impact. Significant staffing shortages prevented Queens Community House from serving 300 more children in its afterschool program. Similarly, staffing challenges is one important variable limiting Encore Community Services to providing only one meal a day to homebound seniors, even though up to 80 percent of the older adults it serves rely on the nonprofit as their only source of food. Many homelessness organizations, stretched thin by vacancies and turnover, could not open new shelter space for the 180,000-plus migrants who have entered the city over the past two years.<sup>4</sup>

Along with the human toll, consistent turnover comes at a high monetary cost to the sector. Individual organizations report spending as much as \$4 million in 2023 toward rehiring and training staff or paying substantial recurring expenses such as \$12,000 a month for an outside recruiting firm, adding another financial stressor to nonprofits that have already been struggling with insufficient government contracts, late payments from city agencies, and, in many cases, declining donations.

"The largest issue in the sector, and definitely the largest issue that I have been contending with over the past year, has been the challenges of recruiting and retaining a workforce of highly qualified, highly valued individuals to do this essential work," says Muzzy Rosenblatt, CEO of Bowery Residents' Committee.

Several factors contribute to alarmingly high staff turnover and perpetual vacancies in the human services sector, but none plays a greater role than the low wages prevalent at most nonprofit human services organizations. Out of the 33 organizations that the Center for an Urban Future surveyed for this report, all of them cited low wages as the main reason that they could not fill their jobs for the long term.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that most nonprofits want to raise wages significantly for their employees, but are hamstrung by the contracts they receive from city and state government which, for years, have failed to cover the full cost of the services they provide. This chronic underfunding in city and state contracts give nonprofits no choice but to keep salaries low.

Human services leaders interviewed for this report say the salaries they can afford to offer for crucial staff positions, from social workers to nurses to youth workers, is shockingly low given the city's cost of living. In 2022, the average wage for the social assistance sector was \$38,458.<sup>6</sup> For reference, according to a 2023 report, an adult with a preschooler would need anywhere from \$82,154 to \$119,474 annually to meet basic needs, depending on which borough they lived in.<sup>7</sup>

"I've got employees who need to use food stamps in order to survive, they have to take advantage of the very systems we

plug people into,” says Janelle Farris, president and executive director of Brooklyn Community Services, a human services organization which serves 20,000 New Yorkers each year.

Another contributing factor is that nonprofits consistently lose staff to city and state government agencies and the healthcare industry—both of which offer better salaries and benefits—and even to food service and retail industries that offer similarly compensated positions and less-stressful work. Most nonprofits simply don’t have the financial wherewithal to compete on salaries.

The final challenge is that a growing number of people today prefer to work remotely for at least part of the week, a practice that is not practical for many frontline human services positions. As a result, nonprofits sometimes lose staff—and potential applicants—to employers in other industries that pay similar salaries but allow employees to work remotely for part of the week.

To their credit, city and state leaders have taken encouraging steps to address pay inequities for the human services sector. In March, Mayor Adams announced a \$741 million cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for an estimated 80,000 human services workers, and followed up with the creation of the city’s first Nonprofit Advisory Council. In prior years, the Adams administration boosted funding for indirect costs and established the Mayor’s Office for Nonprofit Services.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the mayor and Comptroller Lander have worked together to improve the time it takes to register and pay out on contracts to nonprofits and clear a backlog of more than \$5 billion in unregistered contracts and late payments.<sup>9</sup> In Albany, Governor Hochul and the State Legislature approved a 2.8 percent cost-of-living-adjustment (COLA) in fiscal year (FY) 2025 for many workers in the human services sector.

Mayor Adams and City Council Speaker Adrienne Adams have also launched new efforts to help expand access to city government jobs and reduce public sector vacancies—including the mayor’s initiative to remove college degree requirements from thousands of city positions, and the speaker’s proposal to create a new program that would connect City University of New York (CUNY) students to careers in government.

While these actions have been valuable, the staffing crisis the sector faces today highlights the need for city and state leaders, along with philanthropy, to go further. There are a few things they can do. First, Governor Hochul and the state legislature should pass a COLA each year that keeps pace with rising costs and pass legislation to ensure that all state nonprofit human services contracts are included. In addition, the state should pass legislation creating a Human Services Wage Board to recommend wage levels and year-over-year funding increases for state-funded human services contracts. These policies can deliver meaningful increases in wages for workers, reducing vacancies and turnover. Further, city and state government leaders can tackle the history of low pay in the sector by reforming the nonprofit contracting process to reflect the true cost of delivering services, enabling more organizations to pay living wages to workers whose crucial roles are funded primarily through government contracts. In turn, these changes would free up more of New York’s philanthropic organizations to invest in helping human services nonprofits build more inclusive, supportive, and aspirational workplaces—instead of simply filling gaps between government funding and the true cost of program delivery.

Along with boosting pay—the key issue driving vacancies in the sector—other initiatives beyond compensation increases can also contribute to increased hiring and improved retention. Policymakers, with support from philanthropy, should strengthen education and training pipelines into human services careers by launching a new Pathways to Human Services Initiative. This should include expanding the Human Services Career Advancement Scholarship at CUNY; designing a CUNY Human Services Fellowship to build more pipelines from CUNY into human service organizations; and starting a Human Services Training Accelerator that would subsidize training for in-demand positions on both the frontline and in the operations needed to run organizations. The state should also implement a NYS Human Services Worker Loan Forgiveness Program, providing a financial boost to human services workers struggling with student loan debt.

Now is the time for policymakers to strengthen human services organizations for the long term by ensuring they have the staff

they need to provide critical services.

## THE EXTENT OF THE HUMAN SERVICES STAFFING CRISIS

New York City's human services organizations face a significant level of vacancies.

A vast majority of the human services organizations the Center for an Urban Future surveyed from August to October 2023 experience significant staff vacancies. Of the 27 organizations that provided a vacancy rate, 18 had a vacancy rate of 15 percent or more, and seven had a vacancy rate of 20 percent or more. These vacancies mean there are thousands of people missing in all corners of the city to run the vital programs that serve the most under-resourced communities.

Although the 27 organizations which provided data had different levels of vacancies, the average vacancy rate was 15.6 percent, with the highest reaching 26 percent. And these organizations hire thousands of people and serve hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers; the 27 entities who supplied a vacancy rate collectively employ nearly 27,238 people and serve over 875,690 people each year. Alicia McGrath, speaking when she was the executive vice president of mission at Goodwill Industries of Greater New York and New Jersey, says the staffing challenges in the organization's intellectual and developmental disabilities programs are greater than they have ever been.

"I've been in the field of supporting persons with disabilities for over 30 years and this has been a reckoning like I've never seen before," says McGrath, who now works as the CEO of Center for Family Support. "Recruitment and retention of DSP's was already a problem in terms of vacancy and high turnover rates. But I think COVID-19 and its impact really accelerated the issue. It was like putting gasoline on fire. We have still not recovered."

Across the board, human services organizations reported the positions hardest to hire for are those that are directly on the front line—the ones that, in recent years, have been the most critical to keep New Yorkers afloat amidst an array of crises. These positions span from licensed social workers counseling the city's youth to case managers for homeless shelters. But historically, according to nonprofit leaders, those vital jobs are the most difficult to fill, and the vacancy rates for these positions tend to be higher than the vacancy rates for these organizations overall.

In particular, a handful of homelessness- and youth-focused nonprofits in the city face a significant number of vacancies.

- WIN, one of the largest providers of family shelter and supportive housing in the city, serving 5,000 New Yorkers a night, had 240 unfilled roles as of October 2023. It employs a current staff of 1,000. The organization also reported a 32 percent vacancy rate for its residential aides at its shelters, an 8-point jump from its 24 percent overall vacancy rate.
- New York Edge, an organization with about 1500 active staff working with schools in each borough to provide holistic support in academics, health and wellness, the arts, and more to about 25,000 youth, had 306 empty positions in September 2023.
- Bowery Residents' Committee, which serves about 10,000 homeless people each year, had 300 vacancies as of August 2023, while employing an active staff of 1,300. Alarming, it reported a 30 percent vacancy rate for frontline positions such as cooks, porters, and residential aides.
- Project Renewal estimated vacancies between 10 to 15 percent generally, but reported a vacancy rate three to four times higher, of 40 to 45 percent, for direct service roles such as custodians, case managers, case aides, and the front desk staff at their shelters.
- Acacia Network, which employs more than 2,700 active staff, had 614 unfilled jobs in its housing and homeless services portfolios alone, and 447 vacancies in their programs other than housing. While its overall vacancy rate is 19 percent, the rate was more than twice as high—40 percent—in its clinical and medical positions, including clinical

supervisors, certified nursing assistants, social workers, nurses, crisis counselors, peer navigators, and case managers. This 40 percent rate does not include the organization's housing and homeless services programs, which Acacia estimates may double the vacancy rates for clinical and medical positions.

- The Children's Village, which provides services to 20,000 children from foster care to after-school to juvenile justice programs with about 1,400 active staff, had 363 vacancies as of September 2023. During the fall of last year, the organization decided not to pursue two opportunities to provide additional services, leaders say, because they would not be able to appropriately staff it, potentially hurting children and families.

These staffing shortages feel acute in care-related roles, since city-wide, employers face tremendous and growing shortages in the number of social workers, nurses,<sup>10</sup> and other critical staff. The American Journal of Medical Quality estimates that New York State will have a shortage of 39,000 registered nurses by 2030.<sup>11</sup> For the human services sector, these city-wide staffing shortages exacerbate its existing struggle to retain workers.

"We've all heard about specifically the healthcare worker shortage and, in the nonprofit sector, that crisis has been compounded," says Gabriela Gonzalez, assistant vice president of communications and development at Acacia Network. "Some folks might say, 'Why come work at a community-based nonprofit in the Bronx when you can go to a big hospital?'"

Staff turnover is also alarmingly high across the human services sector.

While staffing vacancies are a huge problem, human services organizations also struggle with unsustainable levels of staff turnover. Organizations interviewed for this study mentioned a constant cycle of employees leaving and joining their workforce, requiring excessive time and money to keep refilling positions. Some of the leaders from the nonprofits the Center interviewed describe employees leaving after a year or even several months, causing further interruptions to the communities they serve, as they divert resources to recruiting and onboarding rather than much-needed services. Many say that it is difficult to expand or innovate when their organizations struggle to just keep up with what is required of them.

"You're operating in the, 'What are the minimum conditions for success' headspace, as opposed to 'What are the ambitious goals we want for ourselves, our young people, our communities, our programs, what attracted us to do this work?'" says Robin Veenstra-VanderWeele, associate executive director for young adult services at Queens Community House, a multiservice settlement house serving diverse groups of youth, families, and older adults.

Out of the 19 organizations that shared turnover information between August and October 2023, about half had a turnover rate consistently over 35 percent in the last calendar or fiscal year. More than two-thirds had a turnover rate over 20 percent.

Covenant House, a provider serving about 1,500 homeless youth each year, saw about a 50 percent turnover rate in the previous fiscal year. Acacia Network, one of the largest Hispanic-led nonprofits in the city that operates using 100+ affiliate organizations, faced about a 43 percent turnover rate in the same period. It hired 1,400 employees and lost 1,100 employees—the majority of which were in its homelessness services portfolio. Additionally, the organization estimated it saw about 400 to 500 "start-stops," or people who started the hiring process but then stopped before actually starting in a role.

Project Renewal's turnover rate was about 45 percent last year. Over 400 people left the organization in 2022, and over 400 people joined in 2023. For reference, its current active staff totals about 890 employees. The organization is a leading provider of shelter, health, and workforce-related services for the city's homeless population, serving about 12,000 people each year. Project Renewal's goal is to help people experiencing homelessness find housing in six months or less, according to Jasmine Cummings, vice president of programs at Project Renewal; but without adequate staff to put together housing applications, the New Yorkers they serve spend longer stretches of time without a permanent home.

"Vacancies lead to current staff taking on more, and when current staff take on more, it takes away from the time that they have and the care that they can give to each client," says Cummings. "Because of vacancies, our staff are tasked with more

work, and sometimes housing appointments might be delayed. This may result in lengthier timeframes for our clients to reach a point of moving into housing, since there are less bodies to provide support.” The nonprofit also estimated that hard-to-hire frontline staff have an average retention of just eight months.

Other research has also shown the high turnover in human services worker positions. The Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies (COFCCA) released a report in August 2023 that found, of 27 child welfare agencies in New York City, that average turnover in 2022 was about 63 percent among residential childcare workers and 61 percent for family foster care caseworkers. The average caseworker turnover rate across the city programs that COFCCA surveyed was 51 percent, 20 percentage points higher than in its 2020 survey.<sup>12</sup>

## THE IMPACT OF STAFFING SHORTAGES

The distressing level of staff vacancies at human services organizations has a deeply human impact: nonprofits often reach fewer people in their communities, are unable to optimally run their programs, or face extreme burnout within their staffs, contributing further to the cycle of vacancies. The high levels of turnover also come at a concerning cost to organizations who already have limited funding to serve their communities.

Vacancies limit the ability of organizations to fully deliver key services to their communities.

Organizations report that high levels of staffing vacancies and turnover mean that there is a higher level of demand than supply for much-needed services. Ron Richter, CEO of JCCA, an organization that helps children with foster care, education, and health and wellness, says that there have been times when his team did not have enough staff for its foster homes. Research has shown that each time a foster care caseworker turns over, it can add up to six months to a child's time in foster care.<sup>13</sup>

“There is a crisis in the availability of foster homes for kids and some of that is driven by the fact that we don't have staff,” says Richter of JCCA. “If you don't have enough frontline staff, it affects the safety and wellbeing of kids. Children who are in foster care or residential care have a very significant level of acuity these days. If you don't have enough people to supervise them and support them, then they're not safe and the other staff aren't safe.”

JCCA also has a program for medically fragile foster children, overseen by Amiee Abusch, JCCA's senior vice president of community services. The program houses and cares for foster children who have serious medical conditions. Abusch says the program needs more nurses with the expertise needed to take on night and weekend shifts. Without adequate staff, JCCA may not be able to admit children who have urgent need of housing and medical services.

“We may get a referral from ACS [Administration for Children's Services] on the weekend,” says Abusch. “And it is challenging to accept that referral, because it may be difficult to have that child be seen within 24 hours by a nurse.”

ACS may have to find another provider, says Abusch, although she estimates that there are only about four other programs that she knows of for medically fragile children in New York City. She also says that after the pandemic, JCCA lost many nurses with higher levels of expertise. Pay is one of the main reasons people at JCCA have moved on. While JCCA's nurses are skilled, some circumstances require a higher degree of experience.

“If we don't have a high enough level of expertise available, then we're not going to be able to take on additional children who need our care,” Abusch says.

Elsewhere in Queens, hundreds of children expected to participate in Queens Community House's afterschool program at the start of the school year. However, Robin Veenstra-VanderWeele, associate executive-director for youth services, says the



nonprofit had 29 vacancies for afterschool workers for its September launch. Those students were left without anywhere to go.

“Rough math, that’s 300 kids who aren’t getting care on the first day of school or on the first day of the program,” says Veenstra-VanderWeele of Queens Community House. “Families need care. They can’t wait around for us to maybe hire somebody and also get them cleared.”

Human services organizations cannot meet growing demand without sufficient staff.

Some organizations say vacancies stop them from expanding services that their communities need. Up to 80 percent of older adults who participate in Encore Community Services’ nutritional program say that Encore is one of their only sources of food, according to the executive director Jeremy Kaplan. Due in part to vacancies and limited funding, especially for drivers and delivery staff, he says, those older adults only eat once a day.

“We would love to give those people two or three meals a day, because either they don’t have the capability to cook for themselves or they don’t have the resources to cook for themselves,” says Kaplan. “The people that we’re delivering meals to, by definition, they’re homebound. They are frail, and they don’t have access to either a friend or a family member who can cook or bring meals to them, and funding for sufficient numbers of staff members to deliver more meals needs to be a priority.”

Union Settlement is another human services organization with a home-delivered meals program for seniors, which serves about 400 homebound seniors each month across East Harlem. An older adult may either get food much later than expected, or not get a meal at all, because of driver shortages, says president and CEO Dr. Darlene Williams. “If we don’t have enough drivers, that means someone’s not going to get a meal or a driver is doing double duty and we have to pay them overtime and someone’s meal is late,” says Williams of Union Settlement. “That impacts when they can eat dinner, which also can impact their medication because they may have to take their medication with food.”

Vacancies in the sector mean organizations cannot answer calls from the city to handle crises.

Zooming out to a global crisis where New York City has become an epicenter, over 180,000 migrants have arrived in the city since the spring of 2022, many fleeing from either authoritarian governments or economic collapse exacerbated by the pandemic.<sup>14</sup> Tens of thousands need shelter as they seek asylum and work authorization permits. There are a number of human services organizations that hold decades of expertise in housing people and transitioning them out of homelessness. But some organizations have said, because of the struggle to hire and retain staff to keep their current shelters open, they cannot open any more, including Project Renewal, which was asked by the city if it could step in to address the crisis.

“Our response was we would put our ability to deliver all of our services at risk if we took on this additional short-term responsibility when we can’t fill the jobs that we’ve got right now,” says Eric Rosenbaum, president and CEO of Project Renewal.

Burnout in the sector further contributes to the cycle of vacancies and turnover.

Staffing shortages don’t just limit the quantity and quality of services for New Yorkers in need; they also impact the health and wellbeing of the current employees making sure disadvantaged communities receive vital resources. Out of the 33 organizations the Center surveyed, 20 specifically mentioned burnout as a consequence of vacancies, and specifically current staff becoming overwhelmed with the amount of work they need to take on because there are not enough employees.

“What happens is because we’re shorthanded, the people who are good at what they do are overburdened with work,” says Damyn Kelly, president and CEO of Lutheran Social Services of New York. “And so now they’re doing the work of one and a half people, maybe even two people, which leads to burnout, disenfranchisement—all sorts of challenges that they face that creates an unhealthy work environment.”

At JASA, a human services organization working with 40,000 older adults in the city, CEO Kathryn Haslanger said this means drivers who do double routes and casework supervisors take on a caseload themselves because of vacancies on their team. At AHRC New York City, which serves about 15,000 people with developmental disabilities annually, CEO Marco Damiani said vacancies mean managers, along with overseeing their teams, are also taking on the duties of direct service providers to fill vacant shifts at a frequency that is much greater than the job should require.

Constantly recruiting and training new staff costs organizations millions more dollars.

When human services organizations in New York City must constantly refill positions, it comes at a high cost to them. The price of employees turning over is much higher than retaining staff for long periods of time. Turnover costs include the time and money spent to recruit, train, and onboard people, including posting job listings, attending job fairs, temp staffing costs, productivity loss, and more.

- New York Edge reports that it cost \$4 million dollars to rehire the 899 staff positions that turned over in the organization in 2023.
- Brooklyn Community Services estimates that, for the 110 vacancies it saw as of October 2023, its turnover costs added up to \$704,990, including temp help, advertising, and pre-hire onboarding expenses. This amounts to about \$6,400 per employee.
- Queens Community House, in part due to the volume of turnover it was experiencing, needed to contract an outside recruiting firm to keep rehiring workers. It costs the organization about \$12,000 a month for these services.
- African Services Committee details that, just for its job advertisements, it spent an average of \$12,500 between 2022 and 2023.

## CHALLENGES TO FILLING STAFF VACANCIES

### Low pay resulting from underfunded city contracts

The human services organizations interviewed for this report unanimously agree that the sector’s strikingly low wages are the single biggest reason for the staffing crisis—and that the low rate of compensation is a direct result of city and state contracts that, for years, have failed to cover the full cost of service delivery. In short, government contracts simply don’t give nonprofits the ability to offer competitive salaries or provide cost of living raises to existing workers, a problem magnified by the extremely challenging nature of many human services jobs. Even if staff want to work at these nonprofits they begin to look elsewhere where they can make a higher wage, contributing to a great number of vacancies and high level of turnover.

Out of the 33 organizations we interviewed, **all** 33 said wages were the main driver of staff vacancies and turnover in the sector.

The human services sector is one of the lowest paid sectors in New York City, with an average wage of \$38,458 in 2022.<sup>[15]</sup> An assistant teacher at Chinese-American Planning Council starts at \$16 an hour, or about \$33,280 a year. A direct service professional assisting individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities at AHRC New York City may make a starting salary of \$37,440 a year. Meanwhile, some higher-paid positions are still paid relatively low compared to other industries, or



require either intensive work, advanced schooling, or years of experience. A medical assistant at Project Renewal makes \$42,000 a year and requires you to be a licensed registered nurse and have a phlebotomy certificate. A mental health clinician at The Bridge in its community support programs starts at about \$55,000 a year, and requires a master's degree in social work, mental health counseling, nursing, or psychology.<sup>16</sup>

These salaries also fall far below the cost of living for an adult with a preschooler, who need anywhere from \$82,154 to \$119,474 annually to meet basic needs depending on where they live in the city, according to a 2023 report by United Way and The Fund for the City of New York.<sup>17</sup>

"You just have to pay human services workers adequately what they deserve," says Brian Chen, chief strategy officer of the Chinese-American Planning Council. "And everything else, honestly, is a band-aid solution to the underlying issue of low wages."

This is not only an equity issue for the populations these organizations serve, many human services leaders say, but also for human services workers themselves. The human services contract workforce in the city is primarily made up of people of color (75 percent) and women (70 percent).<sup>18</sup> At many nonprofits, some workers receive such low wages that they qualify for the very same government benefits that they are helping their constituents access. "If you are valuing the work that primarily women of color are doing on the front lines at salaries that barely allow people to live without collecting food stamps, without being eligible for public services. Well, that's a statement about your value and budgets are values," says Ron Richter of JCCA. "If you are essentially requiring us through our contracts to barely be able to pay people a living wage, then that's a statement about how much you value the people we serve and our workforce."

A 2021 report from the Human Services Council of New York showed that 15 percent of human service workers qualified for food stamps, higher than 12 percent of private sector workers, and 9 percent of government workers.<sup>19</sup> Apart from the low base compensation being a major issue, fully 25 out of 33 organizations surveyed for this report specifically mentioned that city contracts for the sector do not include embedded cost of living adjustments (COLAs). With raises rare and underwhelming when they do occur, it's no surprise staff turnover is alarmingly high.

"If I were to respond to an RFP with the true cost, it would be much higher than what the city or the state has allocated to pay on any given contract," adds Maria Lizardo, executive director of human services settlement house NMIC, which provides services to New Yorkers in upper Manhattan and the Bronx. "For example, on our right to counsel contract, we may be getting paid 60 cents on the dollar for a case, which is not going to be sufficient for us to keep up with escalating costs to give a yearly COLA, to keep up with the increase in insurance costs."

A typical contract with the city is usually for a minimum of three years, with options for renewal. But it is not unusual for city contracts to last almost a decade without renewal, and therefore, without any changes to funding while costs rise in the city year over year. Without being able to rework contracts on a regular basis to factor in rising costs—not only for salaries to keep pace with inflation but to account for rising costs for rent, energy, and technology—nonprofit leaders are left with few ways of increasing pay for employees.

"We've had contracts go longer than 10 years before there's a new procurement," says Michelle Yanche, CEO of Good Shepherd Services. "For city contracts, you contract usually for a three-year period that could be renewed to six years, and then extended beyond that period. During that time, there's no increase in the amount of money that you get."

Earlier this year, Mayor Adams announced a \$741 million COLA for an estimated 80,000 human services workers—a major step toward boosting pay that will result in annual increases of about 3 percent. While leaders from human services organizations applaud this important step, several noted that the city still has a way to go to make up for years without any COLA and ensure that future city contracts fund market wages for human services workers going forward.

In recent years, Governor Hochul and the state legislature have also taken action to help increase pay for human services

workers, and make up for years of wage stagnation.<sup>20</sup> Many human services leaders said they appreciated the state's recent efforts to raise pay, which included a 2.84 percent COLA authorized for many—but not all—human services workers in FY 2025. Crucially, according to a March 2023 list obtained from the Human Services Council, 23 different programs across New York State were ineligible, including Community Schools, Advantage After School, Health Home Care Management, Independent Living Centers, NYS Supportive Housing Program, Preventive Services, and more.

“The governor did put a bunch of money into human service COLAs the last two years in the state budget,” says Melissa Aase, executive director of University Settlement, an organization which provides everything from mental health to early childhood to immigrant language services to 40,000 city residents annually. “Because the programs I run with state funding are not listed in that legislation, we got zero.”

While human services organizations by and large rely on city and state contracts for funding, some try to supplement their funding through philanthropy to try to raise wages. But there are not enough philanthropic dollars to make a meaningful difference for most nonprofits.

“Every contract that Good Shepherd has is less than the cost that's really needed to deliver the service, which is why organizations like ours try to raise private money to augment that,” says Michelle Yanche, CEO of Good Shepherd Services, which operates over 90 programs for 35,000 New Yorkers each year. “But there's not really enough private money in the world to fully offset it. There aren't private funders who just want to give you a grant to raise salaries. And some organizations aren't able to privately fundraise.”

#### Losing staff to other sectors that pay higher wages or offer similar pay for easier work

Another factor that contributes to staff vacancies is the competition that the human services organizations face for workers from other sectors, including hospitals, retail and food businesses, and potentially its main competitor, city government. Few nonprofits can match the salary levels offered by hospitals and city government agencies, both of which have similarly struggled with staff vacancies since the start of the pandemic and, as a result, have often hired people away from nonprofits. At the same time, nonprofits have even been losing employees to fast food chains, drug stores, and other low-wage fields that offer similar pay as nonprofits but for jobs that are much lower in intensity and stress.

Out of the 33 organizations surveyed for this report, 20 named competition with city government as a major factor contributing to vacancies in the human services sector. They say similar city positions pay much higher than what the city pays its nonprofit workforce to carry out the same services.

A social worker with a master's degree would make a \$60,000 starting salary at The Jewish Board of Family and Children Services. Starting in January 2024, that same social worker could make about \$76,000 working for the NYC Department of Education (DOE). Part-time teacher aides at Grand Street Settlement are paid \$16,000 to \$17,000 a year. At the DOE, they could make almost \$30,000.<sup>21</sup> Bowery Residents' Committee reports that a case worker for the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) is paid a little over \$52,000 a year, while at BRC, they make about \$10,000 less, or \$42,000. Leaders from these organizations explain that the very city agencies that contract them to deliver social services are the places where many of their workers go after leaving the nonprofit world.

“I lost three teachers in the past six months who left our early childhood education program and went to the DOE. I have two staff who left our agency to go work for ACS. I have one staff member who left our agency to work for DHS,” says Damyn Kelly, president and CEO of Lutheran Social Services of New York and board chair of the Human Services Council of New York. “I'm competing with the same people who are paying for [human services] workers.”

Apart from the city, about half of the 33 human services organizations interviewed for this report also say that they are in

direct competition with hospitals for critical healthcare positions such as nurses or social workers. A registered nurse for the human services organization The Bridge may be paid \$80,000 to \$85,000. However, at Mount Sinai, a registered nurse can make more than \$106,000. Similarly, licensed social workers at WIN can make about \$61,000 a year as a starting salary; at New York Presbyterian, a social worker who is a housing specialist can make anywhere from \$72,000 to \$99,000.<sup>22</sup>

The retail and food sectors also serve as competition for the human services sector, report about a third of the 33 organizations interviewed for this study. Leaders detail that before the minimum wage increase of the past few years, the human services sector could pay more than some positions in retail and food; now, especially for entry-level positions, that is largely not the case. Significantly, leaders from these organizations say, the work in retail/food may be less intense for comparable pay, leading many workers to leave for those sectors.

“??When you have individuals who could make \$16 or \$17 an hour at McDonald's and Burger King, you can't pay that same amount and then ask them to be responsible for somebody's life,” says Kelly of Lutheran Social Services. “So anybody who has a choice between working for a human service organization or McDonald's will more likely choose McDonald's because they don't have the stressors that are related to working in our sector.”

A few leaders in the sector even describe how some staff have helped their clients obtain jobs with much higher wages in retail and food than the staff make in human services.

“We did a hiring event for youth last week with IKEA, and IKEA was paying up to \$31 an hour for some roles. An average entry-level salary for a resident advisor who is tasked with the day to day care of vulnerable youth, is \$19 to \$21 an hour,” says Shakeema North-Albert, CEO of Covenant House, which serves homeless youth. “We find that some people who have a passion for working with young people and would do well in places like Covenant House, for example, are forced to work in other, more high-paying industries to make ends meet.”

#### Limited options for remote work make frontline human services work less appealing

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, a growing number of New Yorkers have clamored for the flexibility to work from home for at least part of the week. For some, including working parents and New Yorkers with disabilities, remote or hybrid work has brought a considerable improvement in quality of life. But most human services organizations—because of the nature of the direct services they provide—require work to be conducted in-person and have been unable to accommodate this growing appetite for remote and hybrid work.

“Most human service contracts require that staff be there in person. Because what do we do? We serve humans, in shelters, housing, and health program spaces,” says Janelle Farris, president and executive director of Brooklyn Community Services.

More than two-thirds of the organizations interviewed for this report cited remote work as a driving factor behind staff vacancies in the sector, describing candidates who ask for virtual or hybrid schedules during interviews or current staff moving into more remote-friendly jobs.

## BEST PRACTICES FROM NYC'S HUMAN SERVICES ORGANIZATIONS

While chronic underfunding leaves most human services organizations with little choice but to offer shockingly low salaries, many human services nonprofits employ creative strategies to hire, retain, and develop the potential of their workers. The city and state should consider supporting nonprofit organizations with some of these strategies, alongside the work of matching the wages of human services workers to the cost of living.

## Giving employment bonuses

A host of human service organizations try to dole out limited cash as an incentive for either having employees come into the organization or stay for long periods of time. WIN, Queens Community House, and Good Shepherd Services offer referral bonuses to staff who help recruit new staff members, usually with a requirement that the new employee stay on for several months. WIN, for example, will give a bonus of \$500 to anyone who suggests a new employee who then stays on for at least six months. BronxWorks, Grand Street Settlement and University Settlement have experimented with signing bonuses. Other organizations offer retention bonuses.

## Eliminating degree requirements

Other organizations have developed strategies to strengthen their talent pipelines. Nonprofits such as Bowery Residents' Committee and The Fortune Society reduce barriers for hire by eliminating or easing up on their degree requirements for certain positions. Fortune Society builds in a skills equivalent as an alternative to a degree, apart from licensing requirements.

"Access to higher education and credentialing is very much skewed by race and class," says JoAnne Page, president and CEO of The Fortune Society, a nonprofit supporting more than 10,000 formerly incarcerated individuals annually in reentry. "And we want to take advantage of all talented people we can have, so we build in an equivalent, and that lets us attract really capable people."

## Investing in training

A slew of human services nonprofits also invest in education and training pipelines for their employees. The Chinese-American Planning Council launched "CPC Academy," where individuals receive leadership and management training. Good Shepherd offers a tuition assistance program. Goodwill NYNJ is starting to pay for continuing education credits and licensure exams.

Nonprofits also build pipelines from universities to their workplaces, offering attractive training and advantages. JCCA works with the NYU Silver School of Social Work and Fordham's School of Social Services to recruit interns, who then may later be hired full-time. The Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services developed a Social Work Residency for newly graduated social workers. Over three years, residents receive compensation and benefits alongside comprehensive training, mentorship, and clinical treatment and supervision hours to move from an MSW (Master of Social Work) to an LCSW (Licensed Clinical Social Worker). The Jewish Board's goal is to retain those social workers after their three-year residency, boosting long-term staff capacity.

## Providing wraparound supports

A host of organizations provide dedicated wraparound support to their workers, from childcare to mental health. Many nonprofits launched paid parental leave plans. Community Service Society provides a yearly \$1,600 childcare reimbursement for parents who have children under 13 years old. Goodwill NYNJ gives each of its employees access to Talkspace, an online therapy service, for free.

"My mom used to have a saying that cobbler's children have no shoes," says Lisa Goldey, executive vice president of people at Goodwill NYNJ. "And so making sure the folks who are providing these services to very vulnerable populations have services for themselves."

## BEST PRACTICES TO REDUCE VACANCIES THAT EMERGED FROM THE PANDEMIC

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, states, cities, and institutions were desperate to retain frontline workers, especially healthcare workers, childcare workers and teachers, all fields already facing shortages pre-pandemic and then thrust on the frontlines of crisis. The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, or the COVID-19 Stimulus Package, infused millions of dollars to states to provide direct relief for workers, and many governments used the funds to offer retention bonuses and bolster loan forgiveness programs. States are now challenged to continue these programs as funding from the American Rescue Plan runs out. The federal government is also looking closely at this issue, and started its own initiative in summer 2023, the Department of Health and Human Services Health Workforce Initiative, to improve recruitment and retention in the healthcare workforce.<sup>23</sup> States, cities and organizations are also testing strategies to prevent and address burnout amongst frontline workers, from free mental health services to peer networks to addressing administrative burdens.

### Raising wages

Higher wages have contributed to lower turnover. One study, utilizing data from 2,221 certified nursing assistants, showed a \$1 increase in wage was associated with 2.1 additional months tenure or length of stay on the job.<sup>24</sup> In another study, organizational turnover and wage data were collected from over 500 organizations that provide community-based services to people with intellectual or developmental disabilities. A \$1 per hour increase in entry wage predicted a 3.61 percent decrease in turnover.<sup>25</sup> Seattle's city council voted in 2023 to increase the wages of human services workers with city contracts by 7 percent by 2025 after a study by the University of Washington found that the workforce made 37 percent less than workers in comparable for-profit non-care roles.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, New Jersey requires that direct care workers at long-term facilities make a minimum of \$3 above the state's minimum wage, in an effort to provide a competitive advantage to those roles over minimum wage positions.<sup>27</sup> To its credit, New York passed a 2.84 percent COLA for human services workers in its 2025 fiscal budget.

### Offering retention bonuses

Retention bonuses after a worker spends a certain amount of time at an organization, or as an incentive to stay in a role, have been deployed by many states for frontline workers. Michigan, which was experiencing a 75.5 percent average turnover rate for direct care workers, made its pandemic-inspired pay increase of \$2 per hour permanent.<sup>28</sup> Select school districts even offered a \$25,000 down payment assistance for teachers who live in the district.<sup>29</sup> In 2023, Georgia offered a \$1,000 year-end bonus to teachers and other employees in the public school system.<sup>30</sup>

As an example of the effect of American Rescue funds, in 2022 Maine's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) doled out bonus payments averaging to \$3,429 per direct support worker. Following the payments, agencies retained 82 percent of staff, according to a survey of 293 participating agencies (about 80 percent of all agencies that received funds), assessing bonus payment data from 24,499 workers.<sup>31</sup> While studies on the effectiveness of retention bonuses are mixed, many of the organizations interviewed for this report have used them as a stopgap measure to keep employees and reduce vacancies.

### Providing burnout supports

Human services workers sometimes contend with intense situations—whether in foster care, mental health treatment, or shelters—and compounded by vacancies, work can lead to burnout. Several other industries have implemented strategies to address the mental health of frontline workers, and deter people from leaving service. The Finest Care program at New York-Presbyterian, for instance, offers confidential mental health services at no cost. Peer support models also may mitigate burnout.<sup>32</sup> The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality's National Nursing Home COVID-19 Action Network matched

staff from over 9,000 nursing homes with mentors and coaches while they were trying to keep everyone on-site safe. Increasing the time employees can spend quality time with their clients may also help employees with burnout. Hawaii Pacific Health's "Getting Rid of Stupid Stuff" sought staff input to help the system eliminate unnecessary or poorly designed administrative tasks, and led to saving 1,700 hours per month of staff time on administrative tasks across their health system.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

At a time when 50 percent of New Yorkers cannot cover their basic needs—amid pandemic-exacerbated inequities in mental health, food insecurity, homelessness, and poverty—a fully staffed human services sector is more important than ever to New York's future.<sup>34</sup> The sector's disproportionately low wages, which consistently fall below the city's cost of living, is a glaring equity issue in a sector where the majority of workers are women and people of color. As a consequence, the sector is grappling with high levels of turnover and thousands of staff vacancies—issues that threaten the ability of the city and state to meet their obligations to the most vulnerable New Yorkers. At the same time, opportunities exist to help build stronger pathways into human services careers, and to develop new incentives and supports that can boost hiring and retention. The following recommendations for government and philanthropy aim to reduce vacancies and turnover and to support existing and new human services workers—with the goal of strengthening the city's ability to care for New Yorkers in need and navigate future challenges.

**1. Establish an annual, recurring COLA that reflects rising inflation and living expenses.** It will be impossible to solve the staffing crisis facing human services workers in New York City without boosting pay for nonprofit workers. Earlier this year, Mayor Adams announced a 9.27 percent cost of living adjustment over the next three years—just over 3 percent a year—for workers in human services organizations that contract with the city. This was a big win for human services workers and for all New Yorkers who benefit from a strong safety net. But while the three-year COLA is a huge step in the right direction, city leaders should institute an annual cost of living adjustment (COLA) that recurs every year to help ensure that workers' pay keeps pace with inflation and living expenses.

**2. Enact a state Wage Board.** This year, Governor Hochul and the State Legislature approved a 2.84 percent COLA for many but not all human services workers. This was a hugely welcome step, but it falls short of the need. In future years, the state should commit to enacting COLAs that keep pace with inflation and help ensure that contracted human services workers earn living wages. To do so, the state should pass legislation authorizing a Human Services Wage Board that will recommend equitable and sustainable wage and salary levels for the sector. State leaders should also pass legislation expanding COLA eligibility to the many human services workers who are not included in the current statute.

**3. Fix the nonprofit contracting process to fully pay for the cost of services.** The relatively low compensation that human services organizations can offer their workers is a result of city and state contracts that do not fully cover the cost of delivering services. Staff salaries are among the few items in a contract that organizations can cut down on to ensure they can keep up with other rising costs of delivering services, including rent, utilities, and insurance. Contracts can also go without renewal for up to a decade, which means that pay stagnates even as inflation continues to drive up costs. To address this chronic challenge, the Adams administration should work with every contracting city agency to ensure that RFPs are designed to cover the full cost of quality service delivery and include more frequent renewals, or nonprofits will not be able to make meaningful salary increases. A previous study from the Center for an Urban Future also found the contracting and reporting process is needlessly burdensome, with delayed payments, duplicative paperwork, and fragmented reporting systems, causing further staff burnout that can lead to vacancies. The city has started to take steps to improve the contracting process, but much more work will be needed to ensure that contracts are registered and paid on time, and to reduce maddening administrative burdens.



**4. Create a Marshall Plan for bolstering the Human Services Sector.** While meaningful progress in reducing vacancies and turnover is only possible with significant and sustained pay, improving staff retention at human services organizations will require interventions and investments that go well beyond better pay for the sector's workforce. What's needed is a Marshall Plan for the sector that includes a variety of new initiatives—supported both by city government and philanthropy—that invest in this long-underappreciated workforce.

- **Establish a Pathways to Human Services Initiative.** The first step in the Marshall Plan for bolstering the human services sector should be to create a Pathways to Human Services Initiative, a major effort to strengthen the education and training pipelines into the human services sector. The initiative—backed with key support from philanthropic leaders—would include boosting the Human Services Career Advancement Scholarship at CUNY, which started in 2021 to reach about 400 people, but should expand to reach 1,000 more. It would also include designing a CUNY Human Services Fellowship, like CUNY's Civil Service Pathways Fellowship, to build more pipelines from CUNY to human services careers and fill positions with high vacancies and turnover; and launching a Human Services Training Accelerator with stipends for on-the-job training to help fill in-demand positions in human services organizations.
- **Launch a New York State Human Services Professional Loan Forgiveness Program to reach 5,000 human services workers.** To incentivize workers to stay in the human services sector and reduce vacancies, policymakers should expand access to loan forgiveness programs. New York has a handful of loan repayment programs administered by the state's Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC), including programs for social workers and child welfare workers. However, only certain districts within each borough are eligible for the social worker program, and just a small subset of human services organizations can receive aid for the child welfare program. Even currently eligible workers may have no idea that these programs exist. New York State should launch a new NYS Human Services Professional Loan Forgiveness Program, which would combine the existing programs for social workers and child welfare workers; add in additional key occupations including case managers, direct service professionals, or residential staff; and partner with the City of New York, CUNY, and other local universities to help market these programs to eligible workers and current or prospective students.
- **Boost worker retention in human services jobs by offering a Human Services Retention Bonus of up to \$1,000 for frontline workers.** Many human services organizations offer their workers a retention bonus if they stay at the organization for an extended period of time. While raising the compensation of human services workers year over year is the main solution to reducing vacancies and turnover in the sector, these small cash bonuses can be an effective incentive for a worker to join and then stay at an organization. However, human services organizations are stretching their already limited budgets to implement this stopgap measure. Meanwhile, other states such as Michigan, Georgia, and Maine have given retention bonuses to frontline government workers to incentivize them to stay in their positions. New York State, perhaps funded via a public-private partnership, should subsidize a \$1,000 Human Services Retention Bonus program for hard-to-retain positions at nonprofits, many of which are frontline workers.
- **Offer no-cost mental health supports to human services workers to help with burnout.** Fully 20 out of the 33 organizations surveyed for this study say burnout is one of the lasting impacts of vacancies and turnover in the sector. Individual organizations have taken it upon themselves to address the mental health of their employees, such as Goodwill NYNJ, which partnered with online therapy company Talkspace to provide free services to Goodwill workers. The city has already taken some important steps to expand access to tele-mental health services, including a new initiative that makes counseling free for teens. While government should focus on increasing wages, policymakers can partner with philanthropic partners to provide additional support aimed at reducing staff turnover in the sector, including through an expansion of the city's free tele-mental health programs to all human services workers.

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## Endnotes

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CENTER FOR AN URBAN FUTURE

120 Wall Street, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10005

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