Moving Towards Organizational Best Practice

# Human Resources: Staff Supervision

Supportive staff supervision is one of the strongest measures in mitigating the traumatic stress of street intervention work within nonprofit organizations. Street intervention workers articulated a need for reflective spaces where they felt safe discussing their challenges without judgement. Both individual supervision (between a worker and their supervisor) and group supervision (such as team meetings) can support workers in this capacity.

*It’s creating a safe space for us, man. Safe of that some of us can-can actually breakdown and, uh, and cry, you know because we're, um, we're allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, you know.*

*Because we develop a really close relationship, we confide in each other, um, about certain feelings that we have, right? So, one of the best things that came out of confiding in each other, working with each other, really getting to know each other's feeling and how we are actually doing…*

These narratives highlight the importance of training and professional development to support supervisors and their team. Motivational interviewing skills, active listening, restorative justice practices, conflict mediation, and trauma-informed care are topics that can benefit supervisors and their teams. Street intervention workers also reflected a need for supervisors to **embody** balance, self-care, and worker wellness in their own performance. Embodying these dynamics provides a model to follow for outreach workers; if a supervisor is telling workers to practice self-care yet fails to take vacation days, works over 80 hours a week, or is in physically poor health then they are contradicting their message in their own example.

Some supervisors in the study admitted that they often neglect in their own self-care and overall healing and fail to recognize the harm that they do upon themselves. It is important to acknowledge here that supervisors often bear an emotional burden of their team’s wellbeing as well. Whereas workers absorb the chaos and conflict of their participants’ lives, supervisors absorb this second hand *in addition to* the struggles of their staff. One supervisor admitted they “approach their staff like how I approached my participants”, through providing support, referrals, and consultation on both professional and personal issues.

*As people who work with the community, as people who sacrifice a lot of their lives to work within the community, sometimes you're just so used to not looking at yourself, man. You're not looking-- You're not used to-to trying to process your own trauma or trying to help yourself out as much as you're trying to do for them, and, you know, you suffer in the process.*

*So, like getting around people who [are] somewhat like-minded just to decompress and talk about-- talk through, say what you do like about work, what you don't like about work, and then give them space and time. We have a great package as far as excellent time off. But if it's not during like a national holiday, it's very difficult for me to take time off because the work never stops.*

Implied in these narratives is that the absence of adequate, supportive supervision is a contributing factor to organizational trauma. Workers may feel betrayed by their own team members, ‘used’ by their organization, and unsafe in their professional roles.

# Food for Thought

* + Is training or professional development offered to supervisors of street intervention workers to prepare them for a leadership position?
    - What kinds of training do supervisors suggest would support them in their role?
    - What internal resources and/ or external partnerships could be generated to support the leadership development of street intervention workers?
  + How are supervision sessions structured?
    - What is the frequency and length of supervision sessions?
    - Is there a balance between formal (work-related) and informal (general and non-work related) questions asked?
    - How is performance discussed during the supervision?
    - Do supervisors document sessions, is there any required follow-up following a session, and how are supervisors held accountable for follow up?