Moving Towards Organizational Best Practice

# Operations: Time Management

Street intervention work is often described as a 24/7 job with highly porous boundaries between personal and professional lives. Being constantly available to program participants takes a toll on workers, however, and can eventually undermine the quality of services as well as contribute to worker deterioration. While street intervention work cannot comply with a “9 to 5” framework of worker availability, there were several suggestions that emerged from study participants that have the potential to generate a healthier work/ life balance for staff.

*The organization I work for right now, everybody, especially the leadership, outreach is overworked. I mean, extreme, you're talking, my supervisor probably works, at one point 90 to 110 hours a week, easily. Seven days a week, get up at 6:00, start working at 10:00 only get up to use the restroom and eat.*

*There's never a nine to five. It's never going to be your, you know, your clock in and clock out kind of scenario. It's a lifestyle of living with people, [being] in mourning with people… I always look at my phone and it is funny cause I actually show my husband and my kids, like, “look at all the people I contacted in then one day”, like it just, the list goes on and on. It's a lot of reaching out and saying, how are you? You know, you can say that all day long on social media, but like if somebody's texting you personally, I feel like there's a safeness in that too.*

One study participant shared that the timing of shifts changes depending on the day of week and when there is a higher probability of violence intervention services needed. For example, on a Friday, a worker might come in later (4 pm or after) since they may work until late at night with clients or responding to shootings. Alternatively, a separate study participant shared that their program has an “on-call” person who carries a cellphone to which all crisis calls are directed. This emergency cell phone is rotated among staff; this way, program participants have 24/7 access to support, however not all staff are burdened with 24/7 availability to program clients. Finally, a study participant shared that their outreach team practiced high levels of collaboration in their work with clients. Every street intervention worker was familiar with the others’ caseload. They would visit clients collaboratively as a team and make every attempt to connect their clients with multiple staff members; this way, the responsibility of outreach and engagement is shared across an entire team versus the individual burden of a singular worker.

*It's just stressful now. It's very stressful. It's like we haven't stopped doing what we do. And we took on extra work during COVID with passing out food boxes and PPE equipment every day and, you know, doing things that help the community. And here it is, you taking a back seat. Your family is taking a back seat to all of this. Why are you dedicating yourself and putting yourself on the front lines for your community? So, you know, it's like, I really don't have time to really spend with my family the way I like, because I'm always at work or dealing with clients or, you know, stuff like that. So, it's-it's been stressful.*

Even if the organization creates a schedule or system to create a healthy structure for street intervention workers, there will inevitably emerge crises situations where staff work extended hours, in the middle of the night, for over 24 hours without a substantial break. When these instances occur, there is an opportunity for organizations to develop a protocol where staff take paid time off (not vacation or sick time) to recover from the incident. Some organizations have expanded sick leave to include “mental health days”. This period of recovery following a crisis response does not necessarily fall into a mental health leave; pure physical exhaustion necessitates a break that should not be penalized by using sick or vacation days. It could be helpful for organizations to consider what period of recovery time is appropriate, and how workers and supervisors will be held accountable for utilizing this recovery time.

# Food for Thought

* + On average, how many hours per week are street intervention staff working on-site?
  + How many more hours are they working from home via responding to calls or texts, doing data entry, etc.?
  + Do staff have a work phone that is separate from their personal phone?
  + Could our organization benefit from a crisis line or a crisis cell-phone?
  + How are healthy boundaries with time management modeled by administrators? Supervisors?
  + What kind of recovery time is permitted following a crisis incident? Could workers benefit from having a period of paid leave following a crisis response?