

Working Within a Broken System; Caseworker Perspectives on Homelessness in King County

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Abstract

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Objectives. Homelessness caseworkers are in demand in cities experiencing high numbers of visibly unhoused people. We aimed to understand the roles, working conditions and views of caseworkers who coach and assist unhoused individuals in the Seattle metro area.

Methods. We conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with caseworkers who were supporting unhoused individuals in the Seattle metro area of Washington State between January 2022 and March 2022. Using an inductive approach, we used Atlas.ti to analyze transcripts and elicit themes.

Results. Caseworker participants described high levels of job satisfaction with the content of their work, but many frustrations with their working conditions, resources available to offer clients, and very low levels of compensation. Assisting clients in navigating the complicated web of social services in public and private agencies requires in depth knowledge of a fractured system, and relationships with individuals across organizations. Within their own organizations,

caseworkers described short-staffing, feeling underpaid in relation to the physical risk and mental toll of their work, and a lack of a comprehensive resource guide. The resources they can offer clients are limited by a lack of suitable, affordable housing options and high barriers to attaining housing for clients. Caseworkers noted Seattle's policy of relentless and destructive encampment sweeps as regressive and cruel. Though participants overwhelmingly believed Seattle had a better range of social services for supporting unhoused individuals than many other areas of the United States, Seattle-based caseworkers also acknowledged the services available may attract an influx of unhoused individuals, especially from the suburban areas of the county, burdening the thinly spread service providers.

Conclusions. Little is known about the growing number of homelessness-facing caseworkers across America's cities; these workers offer insights into the systems in which they work. To better support unhoused clients, caseworkers need better support from their employing organizations to decrease burnout and increase retention. Additionally, they need better options for homelessness relief from policymakers, shelter providers and other stakeholders. Despite their weaknesses, social service systems in King County are probably stronger than many other places experiencing high levels of homelessness, and may offer a model for other municipalities.

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Introduction

With the dramatic rise in the number of unhoused people in large American cities has come a concomitant growth in the number of professionals and paraprofessionals employed by nonprofit organizations to serve the homeless population. These organizations create various roles for caseworkers, focusing on outreach, housing attainment, crisis stabilization, health services, and legal obligations, among other priorities. In the Seattle area, we estimate more than 100 organizations employ individuals who work directly with unhoused people to connect them to housing, food, health care and other live-sustaining services.^{1,2}

A growing body of research on the causes and consequences of homelessness is emerging, but little literature describes the workforce assisting people to exit homelessness. We found more than 320,000 articles mentioning “homeless” or “housing” in a Web of Science search on full text; fewer than 150 articles employed qualitative research methods to assess caseworkers, case managers, or social workers who work in housing or homelessness. No articles in our search showcased caseworker insight about their own jobs and their capacity to support their unhoused clients.

No single source tracks the number of caseworkers supporting unhoused individuals in Seattle. We identified at least twenty employers in this space. We did not find literature describing an optimal caseload for caseworkers supporting unhoused individuals, but caseworkers serving other client types (e.g., child welfare) were found most effective when working with a caseload of 16-17 clients.³ During the most recent one-night count in January 2020, surveyors identified 11,751 unhoused individuals; if each caseworker served 17 clients, that would indicate a need for 692 caseworkers to serve unhoused clients in Seattle.⁴ The online job search engine *Indeed* shows more than 540 job openings in King County for housing case managers in May 2022, suggesting a massive shortage of caseworkers by ideal standards.⁵

Caseworkers, case managers, and social workers (hereafter, caseworkers) have unique insight into the dilemmas faced by unhoused individuals, as they both support unhoused individuals and interact frequently with other social service providers. Many even have lived experience of homelessness. As such, it is important to collect the views of caseworkers on facilitators and barriers they face when supporting their unhoused clients.

Caseworkers across many client sectors report high levels of burnout in their profession, though most research and evaluation focus on the context of youth and elder services, not homelessness.^{6,7} One study found more than 60% of caseworkers in the social services sphere suffered from moderate burnout associated with depression and dysfunctional attitudes.⁶ Another study concluded that job-related stress and time pressure at work, both factors in supporting unhoused individuals, lead to burnout.^{7,8} As supervisor support decreases, burnout increases, predominantly for caseworkers in the first two years of their new roles.⁸ Prior to the

COVID-19 pandemic, caseworkers were already at significant risk of burnout, but the additional challenges posed by this global pandemic likely compounded stress and likelihood of burnout.⁹

Burnout leads to a negative reinforcement loop in caseworker support of unhoused individuals (Figure 1). Individuals experiencing burnout may be less able to adequately support their clients. Exhausted individuals may be more likely to quit, leaving agencies short-staffed, increasing the work-burden and likelihood of burnout of their colleagues. Short-staffed agencies may not be able to provide adequate training for new hires, so these new hires, not appropriately prepared for their jobs, may be at increased risk of burnout themselves. Finally, unhoused individuals bear the burden of caseworker burnout, not just through dysfunctional attitudes and inadequate support, but through experiencing caseworker turnover and the need to re-develop rapport with new caseworkers.

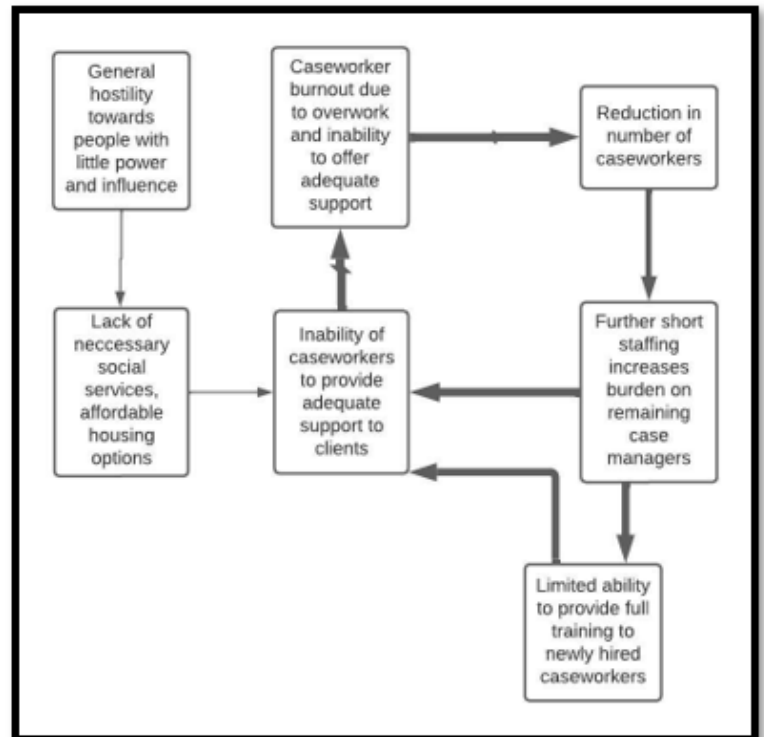


Figure 1- Authors conceptual model of homelessness caseworkers burnout pathway

A number of models advance our understanding of the causes and consequences of homelessness, and shape how caseworkers interact with clients. The dominant model may shape the nature of casework. These models are not comprehensive, but understanding current thinking helps frame future steps. In the Marxist Theory of Power Distribution, Karl Marx posits that capitalism depends upon conflict between the bourgeoisie (wealthy) and the proletariat (working class). The bourgeoisie maintain power in capitalistic societies by preventing the proletariat from accumulating wealth and therefore power.¹⁰

Two housing models illustrate a stark contrast in current thinking. The Housing First model is based on the belief that individuals have a right to shelter, regardless of extenuating factors such as mental illness, drug addiction, or other ailments. Proponents of this model believe that once housing is established, other issues are more easily be addressed.^{11,12} Meanwhile, the Continuum of Care Model contends individuals must be “housing ready” and may need to work through specific supportive services before becoming eligible for housing subsidies. Conditions of scarcity buttress a bureaucratic need to rank people by need and ability.¹¹

Representative Bureaucracy Theory contends that individuals represent the interests and respond to problems of some clients more than others, and that caseworker demographics should reflect client demographics, as people advance preference of their own group. In the context of homelessness and caseworker support, clients would benefit from having caseworkers that mirror their demographics, leading to more active support.¹³ One analysis concluded that “paternalism”

in supporting unhoused people is only appropriate for individuals who suffer from severe mental illness or are at risk of harming themselves and others.¹⁴ These models shed light on various considerations when supporting unhoused individuals, varying in regards to values, ideology and level of responsibility.

Several studies evaluate the relationship between caseworker support and use of public services, showing that if unhoused individuals are provided caseworker support, they are less likely to use public services such as emergency rooms, jails, and sobering centers. These findings suggest the provision of case management leads to long-term public savings. It is important to note that in most of these studies, housing is provided in conjunction with caseworker support.^{15,16}

The existence of a caseworker - client relationship may be even more important than the resources or interventions promoted by the caseworkers. One Seattle researcher showed that unhoused people living in tent cities with informal or formal advocates experienced shorter duration of homelessness.¹⁷ Many unhoused people initially become homeless after losing social ties, and building relationships with caseworkers shows the benefit of intrapersonal connection, helping the client build more capacity to solve problems.¹⁸

Even with extensive research on mechanisms affecting the ability of unhoused people to secure housing, major gaps remain. While it is important to ensure the experiences and perspectives of unhoused individuals are central to this continuing conversation, the views of caseworkers could inform our understanding of how to eradicate homelessness.

Methods and Analysis

To learn about the job content, working conditions, and role of caseworkers in mitigating the harmful effects of homelessness, we conducted interviews with caseworkers about their work, including barriers in supporting their clients and the personal mental toll of their work. Our cross-sectional design was intended to answer the research question, “what are the characteristics and working conditions of caseworkers jobs, and what challenges do caseworkers face in effectively serving their clients?” We prepared the interview guide in consultation with both an individual with lived experience of homelessness and an individual working as a caseworker supporting unhoused individuals (Appendix A).

Any individual working as a caseworker in King County, supporting clients who are unhoused, was eligible for inclusion in this study.

To identify respondents, we employed a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling. We identified twenty Seattle-area organizations including shelters, non-profits, government organizations and religious groups that employed caseworkers supporting unhoused clients (Appendix B). We contacted organizations through emails and phone calls, relying on publicly available contact information or individuals known to the study team. We requested to speak with caseworkers representing various lived experiences, years in the field and education levels to ensure a wide range of perspectives (Appendix C). Interview participants were also asked to connect the research team with eligible peers at the conclusion of their interviews.

Six organizations responded to our requests to interview, although two were unable to connect us to caseworkers due to challenges associated with short-staffing. A total of seventeen interviews were conducted with participants from the remaining four organizations, ranging from 45 minutes to 110 minutes. One participant withdrew their consent after completing their interview, and so their data was dropped from the study. Participants were compensated \$30, a level determined to be fair but not coercive. After completing the interview, participants were sent a brief demographic survey; 13 participants responded to the survey (Table 1).

Interviews were conducted using Zoom videoconferencing technology. Interviews were recorded and the research team employed auto-transcription technology. Following the interviews, transcripts were manually reviewed for accuracy and readability.

Interviews were coded using Atlas.ti coding software.¹⁹ The research team employed inductive coding methods.¹⁹ The first author developed the codebook and coded all interviews (Appendix D). An independent coder also reviewed interview transcripts and coding results were compared to assess inter-coder reliability; a Krippendorff α score of .94 was calculated, indicating a high degree of inter-coder reliability and therefore minimal bias. Finally, codes were analyzed to identify recurring themes across interviews.

The UW Institutional Review Board approved this study (STUDY00014505).

Results

During interviews, the research team asked about the nature of casework, challenges faced on the job, and facilitators and barriers related to serving unhoused clients during the interviews. Participants reflected on their current work and provided recommendations for improving service delivery.

Age Breakdown: Mean: 35.23 Min: 26 Max: 67	Time Spent Working in Social Services: Less than one year: 1 1-3 years: 2 4-9 years: 7 10+ years: 3
Gender Count: Woman: 5 Man: 5 Non-Binary: 3	Time Spent Working with Unhoused Individuals: Less than one year: 1 1-3 years: 6 4-9 years: 5 10+ years: 1
Education Level: High School Diploma/GED: 2 Associates Degree: 1 Bachelors Degree: 7 Graduate Degree or Higher: 3	

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Caseworkers described the most effective ways to train and orient new caseworkers

All participants received at least a high school diploma and several indicated they had completed a graduate degree or higher. However, when asked to reflect on their job preparation, no participants stated that their academic education was the most valuable resource in preparing for their work. Three mechanisms emerged as most helpful in preparing for their roles as caseworkers: prior lived experiences, job trainings, and the role of shadowing.

Prior Lived Experiences provide a robust foundation for being a strong caseworker

Interview participants reflected on the value of previous life experiences in their work. Every participant identified some lived experience that prepared them for this work outside of academic endeavors. The nature of these lived experiences varied by participant; for a majority, the lived experiences included prior work in social services or volunteering with organizations supporting unhoused individuals. Five participants experienced homelessness in the past, two additional participants experienced housing instability, and three discussed a history of drug use or mental health problems. Participants with a history of homelessness or mental health issues spoke to their power as peers, specifically how they were able to use themselves as examples of success stories to motivate their clients.

Shadowing is a useful onboarding activity

Shadowing was identified as a very useful tool for learning about the role of caseworkers. One participant stated “the most valuable experience for the training was shadowing, like actually seeing what it was like working with people.” Another participant, when considering onboarding, said “I would just prioritize shadowing.” However, though shadowing was noted as a helpful tool for onboarding, participants also noted that, with the current state of understaffing, shadowing was very hard to schedule. One interviewee stated:

“the problem was we were so short handed it was really hard to find opportunities to shadow, because while that co worker was doing that activity, I would have to be covering something else.... it took about a month and a half, until we kind of had a couple of extra staff and I was able to advocate for getting those shadowing opportunities. The impression that I got was that had staffing levels been at 100%, the way they were handling the onboarding probably would have been great, it probably would have functioned perfectly fine, but because of the staffing shortage it just didn't function well.”

Job training is important, but they must focus on relevant and appropriate skill building –

We asked participants what job trainings they'd been offered. Participants from two organizations said their organizations emphasized on-job-trainings as part of onboarding, as well as providing ongoing opportunities for training both within and outside of the workspace. Caseworkers identified de-escalation training (n=9) and motivational interviewing (n=5) as the most beneficial trainings. Many caseworkers reported feeling the content of some trainings was not relevant to their work – for example, de-escalation trainings are often designed for individuals working in clinical settings instead of on the street. One participant shared sentiments about the appropriateness of a motivational interviewing training.

“I've had probably three or four motivational interviewing trainings before this one and nothing like this one.... in the past (they) were like ‘this is what active listening is, and this is how you ask open ended questions and you respond to people having a hard time by saying it sounds like you're very angry right now.’ And the training we had last week was with a guy who was very familiar with our clients and our caseload and was able to take it further than that, in a direction that is way more helpful.”

When asked what types of trainings they wanted more of, participants consistently mentioned the need for trainings that were relevant to their day-to-day work, such as efficient documentation, recognizing drug use among clients, and managing work/life balance.

There are limited resources for Supporting Clients

Caseworkers provide many services to their clients, illustrating the diverse needs of unhoused individuals. Interviewed caseworkers represented many different programs targeting specific populations of unhoused individuals. For example, the one program provides support for clients with outstanding legal problems, and another team focuses on outreach efforts. Respondents identified that the variety of service available was a strength of the social service system in Seattle. Caseworkers have so many responsibilities already, and having “specialists” who are more experienced in supporting clients who face specific challenges was identified as very

helpful. While programs target specific populations and have different resources available, many barriers were consistent across programs.

Encampment Sweeps undermine progress for individuals and create a climate of instability and fear

All interview participants expressed disapproval of encampment sweeps, citing the trauma inflicted upon their clients, a waste of public resources, and the overall damaging and regressive nature of encampment sweeps. Significant challenges associated with sweeps included caseworkers not being able to locate their clients after a sweep and the fact that during sweeps, people may throw out valuable documentation such as identification and EBT cards, significantly increasing the amount of time it may take for an unhoused individual to get on the path to housing.

Several caseworkers also commented on how wasteful sweeps were. For example, the city funds both efforts to provide tents to unhoused individuals but also throwing those tents away during sweeps. As one participant stated,

“the county... funds outreach workers to give out the tents. Sweeps the tents, throws them in the trash and then does the same thing all over again, and then also pays for jobs like mine to get people identification and get them their social security cards, so they can start to take these steps and then sweeps those tents and encampments throws the social security cards in the trash along with their IDs and they have to start over”

Emergency Shelters are highly undesirable settings

More than half (n=9) of interview participants spoke about how many of their clients did not want to stay in emergency shelters, preferring to sleep on the streets. One participant said “they'll feel like it's noisy and unclean and they have a lack of control,” another stated “a lot of the clients don't like shelters for a variety of reasons, a lot of trauma come from the shelters” and a third shared that “I don't think people realize how like horrifying and degrading shelters can be.”

The range of client needs is diverse, and yet the capacity to tailor services to individual needs is limited

The diversity of the homeless population creates a need for a wide range of services. This includes housing for women and families, for transgendered individuals, for veterans, for people who have pets, for individuals who use drugs, and more. While many unhoused individuals would be able to live without caseworker support after establishing housing, those who suffer from severe mental illness likely need continued support. As one caseworker said in regards to the need for housing, “A variety of housing is absolutely necessary. We can't stick everybody into the same housing just because they were chronically homeless...we need different tiers of housing.”

It is important to offer a range of housing options to ensure all unhoused individuals have appropriate lodging options, but having so many options presents a challenge for caseworkers, as they need to ensure their clients are seeking housing in locations that are appropriate for their needs.

Wraparound Services are essential in ensuring long-term stability of preciously-unhoused clients

While getting clients housed is a priority, the client/caseworker relationship does not end when a client has secured housing. A majority of caseworkers (n=9) mentioned the need for ongoing support, or wraparound services, to ensure their clients were stable in their new homes. One participant stated “that transition into permanent housing is challenging,” and another said “there's this perception that like ‘Oh, you have housing now you know you should be okay,’ but what we seen is that people had a hard time transitioning into it, like, for example, being alone in a room.” Caseworkers spoke about how people who had been living on the street were used to community, and that the isolation that comes with having your own personal space was too much for some clients to handle.

Working conditions are rough

In addition to challenges in supporting clients, caseworkers face significant burdens in their work that are internal to their workspace and daily workflow.

Every agency is short-staffed, but do more caseworkers lead to fewer unhoused people?

A majority of participants (n=9) described short-staffing at their organizations and the corresponding burden of working in a short-staffed work environment. Four participants specified inadequate supervision as a result of short-staffing. Additionally, short-staffing meant caseworkers were less able to serve their clients. Two caseworkers detailed the expansive geographic areas that they were responsible for doing outreach in, and both caseworkers said it was unrealistic to be able to work with every unhoused person in their area. One caseworker explained the detrimental cycle of short-staffing, and how the burden of short-staffing had a widespread effect.

“There's a lot of reasons for low staffing.... I think a lot of that is a disconnect between the front line staff and the management staff and that just causes us to lose good people. And then those good people just don't get replaced type of thing. And it's very frustrating to work at a facility that's in that state. Because it means more work for us. And it means clients not getting as good of help, as they could be getting which, at the end of the day, is the most important thing.”

Though short staffing was considered a challenge for caseworkers, opinions were mixed on whether a significant increase in caseworkers would significantly reduce the number of unhoused

people in Seattle. Only six of sixteen participants stated they believed an increase in caseworkers would lead to a significant reduction in the number of unhoused people. Five participants stated that without more resources, primarily housing, an increase in caseworkers would be meaningless. The other five participants stated that more caseworkers would improve the quality of life of unhoused clients, but would not significantly reduce the number of unhoused people in Seattle.

Social Capital on the Job is considered necessary

Even though Seattle has a multitude of social services to support unhoused individuals across government, non-profit and for-profit sectors, there is a lack of standardized workflows and processes for getting individuals housed. Three participants from two different organizations mentioned information packets received during orientation, and how valuable the resources in these packets were, but most caseworkers spoke about the lack of comprehensive resource guides. Instead of relying on electronic or printed resources, caseworkers relied on personal connections, knowing the right people in the right organizations to support their clients. One interview participant said they had an extensive knowledge of what services were available, and that many colleagues would reach out to them for help connecting clients to services.

Caseworkers repeatedly mentioned how their work was reliant on knowing the right people, instead of publicly accessible information. One caseworker who recently started at his organization said that a group of new hires were creating a resource guide for the organization. Caseworkers wanted a list of resources that clearly outlined who was eligible for what services, and what the requirements to utilize the services were.

Though caseworkers report satisfaction in their role, the mental toll of work follows them home

Respondents reported high levels of job satisfaction overall. When asked how satisfied they were at their job on a 5-point scale, the average score was 3.9/5. When asked how long they plan to stay in the field of homelessness services on a 5-point scale, where 1 is they want out yesterday and 5 is they would stay forever, the average score was 4.375/5. However, when asked the same question but in regards to their current role, the average score dropped to 3.1/5. While satisfaction rates were fairly high, caseworkers shared many reasons why this job was very difficult.

Interview participants reported being underpaid, especially relative to the difficult nature of the work that caseworkers do. While not specifically probed about salary, several caseworkers reported being paid around \$25 per hour, placing them in the lowest quartile of salaries in Seattle.²⁰ No caseworkers reported that they picked this job because of the pay, and two reported living paycheck-to-paycheck, feeling that they were just one bad accident from being unhoused themselves.

Low pay was especially challenging considering the nature of the work. One caseworker stated “we encounter a lot of very ugly things, we hear a lot of really traumatic stories, we deal with secondary trauma and It needs to be addressed we've got a very high level of burnout, and we don't get paid very well,” a sentiment shared by other caseworkers.

The work was reported to be so challenging that, according to one caseworker, “my colleagues have taken pay cuts, just to move to something that's like a little bit more stable or a little bit less demanding because sometimes that is your mental health and your stability is what matters a little bit more.”

Finally, while all caseworkers reported that they were scheduled for 40-hour workweeks, many reported this was the type of work that you could not leave at the office. Two caseworkers indicated they had to leave phones on to be accessible outside of working hours, and almost all other case managers reported that while they didn't have work to do outside of work hours, their daily experiences affected them, even at home; with so much exposure to trauma, it was not possible to compartmentalize and leave their experiences at work.

Social Services in King County are inadequate, although better than most places

All interview participants presently worked in King County, but approximately half had previously worked in other municipalities and were able to reflect on differences in the provision of care. Other participants commented on differences between regions based on knowledge developed through relationships with care providers in other areas.

All sixteen participants stated that the social services offered in King County, particularly in Seattle, were significantly better than social services in most other areas of the United States. However, all sixteen interview participants also identified significant challenges related to their work and ability to serve their clients in King County. One participant stated “I think we're doing pretty well in King county... If I had never worked outside of King county I'd probably say oh we're doing terrible because it feels so hard” and another participant stated “Seattle social services, it's a growing thing and it's getting better as it's growing and growing... you know I always compare it to how it is in the interior, in the interior it's awful.”

Offering many social services was considered beneficial, but also led to additional burdens. One quarter of participants (n=4) spoke about how good social services in Seattle meant more unhoused individuals moved here to benefit from these services.

“In comparison to the rest of America we do really, really great... like half of my clients are from out of state... the problem is that in Seattle, no matter how much how we focus on our social programs here it's never going to be enough... we're just not able to keep up with the influx... Until we start sharing our knowledge with other states on how they can implement programs like ours to start helping people.”

In addition to unhoused individuals moving here from out-of-state, several caseworkers spoke of service difference within King County, and how service providers in other municipalities in King County frequently send clients to Seattle.

Discussion

The social services offered in Seattle compare favorably to services offered in other municipalities across the United States, but there is much room for improvement. Caseworkers experience challenges both internally in the workspace and also externally, supporting clients navigating through complicated social systems. Both internal and external aspects must be addressed to support caseworkers working with unhoused clients.

One strength of the social services offered in Seattle compared to other municipalities is the existence of a wide range of caseworkers who support unhoused individuals with various needs. Caseworkers already help clients with a variety of services, including getting identification documentation, pursuing healthcare services, and working towards establishing housing. Many clients have specific needs, such as a need for legal support, or crisis stabilization, and having caseworkers who focus on these specific needs means that each caseworker employed in Seattle, while filling many roles, is able to focus on specific needs and does not need to be well-versed in every social service and opportunity that Seattle offers its unhoused residents.

Internally, increasing funding for social services and increasing pay for caseworkers would reduce workspace frustration and anxiety, increase job retention, and reduce burnout and short-staffing. The corresponding reduction in burnout would allow for stronger caseworker support of their client base, and higher salaries could attract more caseworkers, ultimately leading to smaller, more manageable caseloads. In addition to higher pay, caseworkers would benefit from a comprehensive resource guide, outlining available resources and requirements to access those resources, so that caseworkers do not need to depend on social capital as much to support their clients. Organizations which provide social services need to prioritize not just their clients, but their employees as well.

Prior research indicates that for caseworkers who work in youth services, the optimal caseload is 16-17 clients.³ Most caseworkers who were interviewed for this project had larger caseloads, around 20-25, and spoke to the fact that they perceived this to be an unsustainable caseload. While further evaluation is needed to formally assess the optimal caseload for caseworkers who support unhoused individuals, the optimal caseload is likely below the 16-17 identified in the literature as optimal for those who work in youth services, as several homelessness-facing caseworkers reported during their interviews that a significant portion of their day was spent trying to find their more transient clients. This time searching for their clients is necessary, but unproductive.

Externally, policies must be evaluated to ensure they are not detrimental to supporting unhoused clients. Encampment sweeps were identified to be harmful and regressive, through various mechanisms; forcing people to move without a destination, unnecessary trauma, loss to follow-up, and throwing away valuable materials. Another challenge for caseworkers was trying to find appropriate housing for clients, with high barriers in terms of documentation and other requirements. Without appropriate levels of affordable, adequate housing for a diverse client base, there is no way to ensure everybody will have access to housing.

Finally, enhancements to social services would be most effectively implemented in a widespread manner at state or federal levels, not just locally; inequities in social services across geographic regions lead to migration of unhoused individuals to areas with more social services, further burdening service providers working in those regions.

While social services in Seattle compare favorably to other regions, there are still underfunded and inadequate when considering the immense need for services. Increasing funding and the scope of services offered will improve the lives, not just of unhoused individuals, but also of the caseworkers who serve them. In addition, it's crucial to understand what types of services and programs are working in Seattle and implementing similar programs nationwide, so that unhoused individuals are provided adequate support, wherever they choose to live. The needs of unhoused individuals are diverse, and the services offered must reflect those diverse needs.

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Appendix A – Interview Guide

Interview Guide – Caseworker Perspectives on Homelessness **Yaniv Rait**

Hello, and thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this research project.

Before we begin, I want to provide you with a little bit of background. I am currently a 2nd year masters of Public Health student at UW, concentrating in Health Systems and Policy. My thesis research aims to understand the role and experiences of caseworkers working with people experiencing homelessness. I want to learn about caseworker perspectives on homelessness, to understand the content of your work, and to gather suggestions to help improve service delivery for caseworkers who serve unhoused people.

My initial academic literature review reveals there is little published about this topic.

I anticipate this interview taking approximately one hour, and will share my final report with you.

Before we begin, I want to ask you – are you okay with me recording this conversation?

(IF YES) Thank you, I will start recording now. (START RECORDING)

Once again with the recording started, are you okay participating in this interview, and furthermore, are you okay being recorded? Great! (or if not, I understand, so I'll have to take careful notes as we speak)

Also, are you okay if we save your contact information in case we would like to follow up with you in the future? Thank you! (or if not, I understand)

I do want to acknowledge that we may be covering some sensitive topics today, about your line of work and experiences. If you feel uncomfortable, you can end the interview whenever you want. Furthermore, I hope you feel comfortable speaking candidly about your experiences. You may request us to delete this recording and any reference to your participation at any point.

Is this clear, and okay with you?

Before we begin, do you have any questions?

Alright, at this point, I am going to officially start the interview. I am going to start with some general questions about your work experiences just to help frame this conversation, and then we will move into a conversation about factors affecting the population of people without housing.

1. To start with, tell me about your work as a caseworker, and your career path to this point.
 - a. *How did you prepare/train for this job?*
 - b. *How long have you been in this line of work?*
 - c. *Where are you working now, and where else have you worked in this line of work?*

- d. *What's your knowledge of and experience working with people who are struggling with homelessness?*
 - e. *Is there any training you feel would have been helpful in your daily work?*
2. Can you describe your current job?
- a. What is your work structure? Tell me about a typical day
 - i. *Hours, locations, transportation, what you do.*
 - ii. How much time do you spend with clients and where do you see them?
 - 1. *In pairs or alone?*
 - iii. How much time do you spend working on your clients needs while not meeting them?
 - b. What kind of supervision do you get? How do you account for your time?
 - c. How does this work make you feel?
 - i. *Do you feel you have enough support, access to the tools you need?*
 - ii. *What's most frustrating?*
 - iii. *How is the pay, other working conditions?*
 - iv. *Most satisfying?*

Now, I am going to ask a couple questions about your client base, to get a better idea of who you work with.

3. Tell me about your clients – for starters, how big is your client base overall, and how many unhoused clients do you have?
- a. *where do you find them?*
 - b. What roles do you play in your client's lives?
 - c. How do you help your clients establish and achieve goals?
 - d. *What kind of housing would your clients like to have, if they could?*
 - e. *To what extent do your clients understand the factors the conspire to make them homeless?*
4. I am curious about your experience with encampment sweeps. Have you had a role in sweep enactment?
- a. What have you found to be helpful to individuals prior to or in the aftermath of sweeps?
 - b. *What do you think of policy/laws pertaining to sweeps?*
5. What works to help people secure long-term housing?
- a. Are there things that make it easier or harder for you as a caseworker to navigate the system of social services and other resources for your clients?
 - b. What social services are you most likely to draw on to assist your clients? Where are these located? How do you connect clients to services?
 - c. Are there specific social services or policies that make it more difficult to support your client base?

- d. Do you think Seattle has good/bad social services, where do we do well or not well?
6. I'd love it if you could talk about other people in your clients' lives, and the roles these relationships play in helping your clients solve problems, navigate crises, or access resources. Do you have clients with supportive friendships or family members? Are these friends or family members serving as advocates in some way?
 - a. *Do you ever have an opportunity to meet or interact with these friends and family members?*
7. Do you believe that having more caseworkers or caseworkers with particular skills or resources would significantly reduce the number of unhoused people in Seattle?
8. What practical thing would you change in Seattle to make your job easier?
9. If you've worked in other places are there things that work there?

Briefly, I want to ask you a couple more quantitative questions, as it will help me better understand possible reasons people may see things differently and ultimately quantify responses.

10. Do you personally have lived experience with homelessness?
11. On a scale of 1-5, how satisfied are you at your job?
12. How long do you plan to stay in this role, where 1 is you want out yesterday and 5 is you would do it forever.
13. And how long do you plan to stay in this field, either through case management, advocacy, or in other roles? 1 = want out yesterday, 5 is would do it forever
14. Would you recommend this job to your sister?
15. Finally, I want to give you the opportunity to add anything else- is there anything you want to bring up that we did not discuss already?

That concludes our interview. I want to give you a sincere thank you for participating in this interview. I hope that your interview, along with others, helps provide insight into factors affecting homelessness and areas where efforts can be concentrated. As mentioned earlier, we will send out the final report once its complete!

STOP RECORDING

ASK ABOUT IF THEY KNOW OTHER PEOPLE

\$\$\$

Appendix B – Organizations that were contacted

Organizations	Address	Phone
Shelters		
Marys Place	Womans Day Center: 1830 9th Ave Seattle, WA 98101	206.621.8474
Noel House Women's Referral Center	118 Bell Street, Seattle, WA 98121	206-456-3100
Jubilee Womens Center	620 18th Avenue East, Seattle, WA, 98112	206.324.1244
Aloha Inn	1911 Aurora Ave N, Seattle, WA 98109	(206) 283-6070
Womans Referral Shelter	2030 3rd Ave, Seattle, WA, 98101	(206) 328-5696
Sacred Heart Shelter	232 Warren Ave North, Seattle, WA, 98109	206-285-7489
Nightwatch	302 14th Ave S, Seattle, WA 98144	206.323.4359
Salvation Army	811 Maynard Ave. S, Seattle	206-442-8393
Union Gosepel Mission	520 South King Street, Seattle, WA, 98104	(206) 723-0767
United States Mission	931 N 104th St., Seattle, WA, 98133	(206) 781-9113
YWCA Emergency Shelter	Multiple locations	206.819.9988
Chief Seattle Club	410 2nd Ave Ext S, Seattle, WA 98104	(206) 715-7536
Non-Profits		
Sound		(206)-901-2000
REACH	2133 3rd Avenue Seattle, WA 98121	
DESC	515 Third Avenue, Seattle, WA 98104	206-464-1570
LIHI	1253 S Jackson St Suite A, Seattle, WA 98144	(206) 443-9935
Government Orgs		
VA (SSVF)	Lazarus Center 2329 Rainier Ave S	(253) 520-4360
Hospitals		
United Health Care		
Other		
SHARE - Seattle Housing and Resource Effort	1902-2nd Avenue, Seattle, WA, 98111	(206) 448-7889
CCSWW		(206) 323-6336

Appendix C – Outreach Messages

Letter to organizations

Hello XXXX,

My name is Yaniv Rait and I am pursuing a Master of Public Health degree at University of Washington. My thesis project aims to understand the role and experiences of caseworkers who work with people experiencing homelessness. To gather this information, I seek to interview caseworkers from a variety of organizations in Seattle that serve unhoused people.

I hope your organization will connect me with caseworkers to inform my study. I will be conducting interviews, which I expect will take approximately one hour, and have a small grant to compensate participants for their time.

I will share my final report with participating organizations, in hopes it will provide insight on interventions to improve workflows and help secure better outcomes for your unhoused clients.

Please let me know if you are able and willing to help me find caseworkers in your organization to interview for this project. I am happy to further discuss my work if you wish.

Best,

Yaniv Rait, MPHc

Letter to individual participants

Hello YYY,

My name is Yaniv Rait and I am pursuing a Master of Public Health degree at University of Washington. My thesis project aims to understand the role and experiences of caseworkers who work with people experiencing homelessness. To gather this information, I seek to interview caseworkers from a variety of organizations in Seattle that serve unhoused people.

Your contact information was provided to me as a possible interview participant for my project. I hope you will participate in an interview with me to provide your insight. All participants will be compensated modestly for their time (\$30, from a small grant I got to do this), and the final report will be shared with you as well. We expect interviews to last approximately one hour. Interviews can be on zoom or in person.

This interview may cover sensitive topics, but your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any point.

If you are interested in participating, please let me know and I will send additional information.

If you have any questions, please let me know and I will answer to the best of my abilities.

Best,

Yaniv Rait, MPHc

Hello YYY,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. Please use the link below to see available times, and sign up for one. If none of the times work, please let me know and we can work to find a different time.

Please let me know if you prefer Zoom or in-person, as it will make a difference in scheduling.

We anticipate interviews to last one hour. You will be provided a \$30 gift card as compensation for your participation.

I look forward to speaking with you.

Best,

Yaniv

Hello XXX,

I wanted to follow-up to see if you were still interested in participating in an interview about your experiences as a caseworker. If you are interested, you can use the link below to sign up for a time. If none of these times work for you but you want to participate, please reach out and we can work together to find a time that works for us both.

<https://calendly.com/yanivrait/interviews>

As a reminder, interviews are expected to last 1 hour and participants will be compensated for their time.

Feel free to reach out with any questions.

Best,

Yaniv

Appendix D – Codebook

name	comment
Appropriate Housing/Services	Used to capture the diverse needs of clients, most commonly related to unique needs in housing and other social services offered
Autonomy	Captures the autonomous, self-driven nature of case work. This code can also be used to capture discussion of supervision.
Building Rapport	Captures the need and process for developing rapport with clients.
Client Goals	Captures the process of and needs for developing goals with clients.
Current work	Captures both day-to-day workflow as well as general caseworker responsibilities
Encampment Sweeps	Captures comments related to encampment sweeps, including the role of caseworkers during sweeps, and the effect of sweeps on unhoused individuals.
Extended hours	Captures comments about work extending outside of normal hours. This includes both actually working and also the inability to tune out work stress outside of work hours.
External Supports	Used to capture discussion about non-caseworker support for clients, most frequently friends and family members.
housing first	Captures any discussion of housing first, or how clients need stable housing before being able to effectively address other issues.
job training	Captures trainings related to onboarding - either trainings that were helpful, trainings that were not helpful, or trainings they wish they experienced
Lack of housing	Captures discussion of how there is not an adequate amount of affordable housing for clients.
More Caseworkers	Captures comments regarding whether more caseworkers would help reduce the number of unhoused individual, or affect the ability of caseworkers to support their clients.
new clients	Captures the process for onboarding new clients
Other organizations	Captures comments related to working with other organizations who support unhoused people in the region.
prior experiences	Captures work and educational experiences prior to current role.
Recommendations for improvement	Captures comments about what practical things could change in Seattle to improve the ability of caseworkers to support unhoused clients
Seattle Services	Captures interview participants sharing how they believe Seattle compares with other cities in terms of homelessness services and social services overall.
short staffing	Captures challenges associated with short staffing, or any comment about short-staffing
work challenges	Captures challenges in supporting clients, including navigating social systems, loss-to-follow-up, high barriers for attaining housing and other such factors

work satisfaction	Captures positive aspects of the work, including successes with clients
Workplace environment	Captures discussion of workplace satisfaction, including the workspace environment, pay, and other benefits.
Wraparound services	Captures the need for wraparound services, or supporting clients even once they have been housed.