



PROMOTING STAFF WELLBEING TO IMPROVE FRONTLINE CRISIS SUPPORT

Context

Help through Crisis is a £33 million National Lottery funded programme set up by the National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It supports 69 partnerships across England which help people who are experiencing or at risk of hardship crisis to overcome the difficulties they are facing to plan for their futures. The partnerships bring together small voluntary groups and established charities to work together locally and offer people advice, advocacy and support which matches their personal circumstances.

The Help through Crisis learning, evaluation and support (LSE) team is a consortium of organisations commissioned by the National Lottery Community Fund to help build understanding and capture learning from the Help through Crisis programme. This is the first of a series of commentaries designed to share key learning from the programme with wider stakeholders and policymakers. It highlights evidence from the programme about the importance of staff wellbeing in frontline crisis support and the role senior managers, trustees and funders can play in ensuring staff are supported appropriately.

The research involved eighteen case study visits to projects nationwide between October 2018 and April 2019, complemented by a short evidence review. The next commentary in the series is planned for Summer 2019.

Overview

Organisations providing crisis support deal with people who have increasingly complex needs. Frontline staff face considerable challenges as they work to deliver holistic support to people in crisis. These organisations often face financial pressures linked to resource constraints and short-term funding. The nature and level of support for staff varies considerably. Overall, this can create a stressful, pressurised environment that has a negative impact on staff wellbeing. Staff burnout is described as common in the crisis support sector. Improving how staff are supported will enhance their wellbeing and increase their ability to provide effective, ongoing crisis support to people they work with.

Key findings

Frontline crisis support workers face considerable demands

Staff providing crisis support are working to help people in difficult and complex circumstances. However, the considerable demands of providing effective support are not necessarily matched by adequate resources, both within organisations and across their wider network for providing support locally. Support workers involved in Help through Crisis projects spoke of resource constraints and high workload expectations adding pressure to their work:

"There is a sense in the sector that if you're not near-burnout then you're not doing your job properly."

Resource constraints and high workload expectation can result in:



- Capacity pressures on frontline staff, contributing to higher levels of stress and burnout¹.
- More demands being placed on frontline roles with increased risks and responsibilities as the scope of the support they provide changes and expands.
- Frontline staff feel a greater sense of responsibility for those they support, because there are fewer statutory support services available to help people in crisis.

One support worker described how their organisation *“really stretches the boundaries, going above and beyond what other organisations would do, now more than ever”*. This can make it more difficult for support workers to switch off outside of working hours, carrying the pressures of the job with them during their free time.

The pressures on staff are unsustainable without appropriate support

People accessing services are experiencing crisis and may also be affected by trauma. This can place considerable strain on support staff, particularly when the pressure is long term. A lack of adequate staff support combined with challenging work circumstances (e.g. limited resources or an unsupportive organisational culture) can contribute to:

- An increase in the risk of ‘vicarious trauma’ for frontline staff who are providing direct services to traumatised people².
- An increased level of detachment experienced by frontline staff as a result of vicarious trauma and burnout, negatively impacting on their ability to provide support to people in crisis.

Some of this can be avoided by establishing appropriate steps to ensure staff can provide support without compromising their own wellbeing. One Help through Crisis project’s concerns about high levels of demand and staff burnout resulted in a decision by the trustees to pause the project for one month. This was an opportunity to reassess their approach and ensure it became more sustainable. They changed the way their drop-in operates and reduced the numbers of people they support to ensure frontline staff can spend more time with each individual.

Recommendations for improved staff wellbeing

Senior managers and trustees who lead crisis support organisations have crucial roles to play in ensuring there is good support for staff that promotes wellbeing. It is also important that funders recognise and value the importance of staff wellbeing, and embed this in their grant-making processes and general support to organisations to improve practice.

Recommendations for senior managers and trustees include:

- Ensuring staff have **clear and adequate supervision and support** that reflects the pressures they face and supports with preventing individual staff members feeling solely responsible for the people they support. In addition to good line management, this might involve clinical supervision, codes of practice, tailored organisational policies and procedures, or setting aside time with colleagues to share and reflect on their support needs.
- **Gaining up to date experience of frontline delivery** to understand the pressures and experiences of the role, and how these are changing. There are examples of senior staff from

¹ Stalker C, Harvey C. Partnerships for Children and Families Project. Wilfrid Laurier University; 2002. Professional burnout: A review of theory, research, and prevention

² Bride, B. E. (2007) ‘Prevalence of secondary traumatic stress among social workers.’ Social work, pp. 63–70.

local authorities spending time with staff in social care and education services, to improve their understanding of delivery as they shape policy and practice³. Senior civil servants spending one month a year within frontline NHS services provides another useful example⁴.

- **Considering co-producing services with staff**, which involves increasing individual staff members' autonomy and involvement in decision-making. Research suggests that staff will experience less burnout if they have more power in relation to matters that affect them⁵.

Recommendations for funders who award grants to crisis support organisations include:

- Incorporating a requirement in grant applications for organisations to explain in detail how they will **support staff wellbeing and the funding this will require**. This sets an expectation that staff support and wellbeing are embedded in projects or programmes and adequately resourced.
- Providing **training and best practice aimed at helping organisations to understand and improve staff wellbeing**, enabling funded projects/organisations to continually learn, develop and improve their staff support approaches.

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³ For example, see <http://news.oxfordshire.gov.uk/managers-spend-the-week-with-front-line-social-care-and-education-staff/>

⁴ O'Brien, U. 2013. Why DH civil servants will spend a month on the front line. Health Service Journal. <https://www.hsj.co.uk/why-dh-civil-servants-will-spend-a-month-on-the-front-line/5058925.article>

⁵ Slattery M.S. and Goodman L.A., 2009, Secondary Traumatic Stress Among Domestic Violence Advocates: Workplace Risk and Protective Factors Violence Against Women 15(11) 1358–1379