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5-2023

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May 19, 2023

Abstract

This capstone project aims to address burnout among behavioral health workers through research and survey development. The research component involves reviewing existing studies and conducting interviews with staff members of Valley Health Associates to identify key factors contributing to high burnout rates and their consequences. Contributing factors researched include organizational culture, increasing workloads, and demand for behavioral health workers, and organizational climate. The consequences of burnout include physical and emotional health impacts, overwhelming caseloads, and low retention rates. The research findings inform the development of an employee satisfaction and engagement survey that includes questions related to burnout, workload, company culture, job satisfaction, organizational support, and opportunities for growth and development. The survey serves as a tool for Valley Health Associates to help identify and prevent burnout among staff. By addressing burnout, this project aims to improve the well-being of behavioral health workers at the agency and ultimately enhance the quality of care provided to patients.

Keywords: Burnout prevention, behavioral health workforce, employee satisfaction survey.

Agency and Communities Served

Valley Health Associates is a premier provider of outpatient substance abuse and addiction treatment programs in Salinas, California. The agency is state-licensed and accredited and offers comprehensive outpatient medication-assisted treatment services. Valley Health Associates operates following all local, state, and federal regulatory guidelines. Medication-assisted treatment is the use of medications, in combination with counseling and behavioral therapies, to provide a "whole-patient" approach to the treatment of substance use disorders. The staff at VHA strive to provide individualized treatment in collaboration with the patient, counseling staff, and medical team. The treatment includes exit strategies that assist the patient in acquiring the coping skills necessary to live a life free of all mind altering substances. Currently, the agency's staff comprises mainly of substance abuse and mental health counselors, a clinical director, three registered-nurses, two peer-support counselors, and other supporting staff.

The agency's client population consists mostly of individuals who were referred by the county, state, and federal criminal justice systems to receive substance abuse treatment while on probation or awaiting trial. A small percentage of the client population consists of self-paying individuals who voluntarily seeked addiction treatment services, outside of the criminal justice system. Self-paying clients must pay for services in cash, as the agency does currently accept private healthcare insurance plans. VHA also operates a youth outpatient treatment program, offering similar addiction treatment services to clients between the ages of 12 and 17 years old. The client population ranges from individuals in underserved communities and unemployed to those thriving in professional careers after incarceration, all nationalities and ethnicities, but mainly White and Hispanic. More than 95 percent of clients are of low socioeconomic status and receive services funded by Medi-Cal, the state's healthcare program.

Problem Model Background and Literature Review

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Organizational culture: Little to no recognition of burnout, lack of awareness	High burnout rates among behavioral health workers	Emotional and psychical health impact on staff
Increasing workloads/demand for behavioral health services		Overwhelming caseloads
Negative organizational climate		Low retention rate

Problem Statement

The behavioral health workforce includes substance abuse and mental health counselors, peer support specialists, social workers, and other professionals who work in a broad range of settings, including community-based organizations, primary and emergency healthcare settings, social services agencies, etc. The nature of the work of these professionals, often involving helping populations manage mental health disorders, substance abuse issues, trauma, and other issues, can be physically and emotionally taxing. Behavioral health workers experience high levels of chronic work-related stress, time pressure, and overwhelming workloads with limited resources and little to no organizational support. (Kelly & Herald, 2020). These factors and others, including inadequate organizational support and awareness and chronic underinvestment in public health and addiction recovery services, have placed workers in the behavioral health field at significant risk for experiencing burnout, causing many of them to abandon their field.

Over 50 percent of behavioral health workers report experiencing symptoms of burnout. (Kelly & Hearld, 2020). This rate of burnout will likely increase given the increasing need for services along with the behavioral health staffing and retention challenges. (SAMHSA, 2022). Dr. Vivek Murthy, the United States Surgeon General, said that the higher than ever demand for behavioral health services and the shortage of staff and resources have created an imbalance that led to "a moral injury for behavioral health workers from being unable to provide the care patients need and to a fundamental disconnect between them and the mission to serve that motivates them." (Murthy, 2022).

Contributing Factors

Organizational Culture and Lack of Support

Employee burnout is often thought of as an individual issue. It is thought of to be an issue that could easily be resolved by practicing better breathing techniques or doing more yoga. In recent years, mounting research evidence has shown just the opposite. Studies have shown that personal coping techniques may do more harm than good for individuals suffering from workplace burnout. (Song & Baicker, 2019). The issue of employee burnout is increasingly attracting more attention especially after the World Health Organization has officially recognized it as an "occupational phenomenon that results from chronic workplace stress." (SAMHSA, 2022). In a survey conducted by an employee consulting firm, 36 percent of employees said that their company is not taking any steps to help with employee burnout. (Employee Burnout: Maintaining Focus, Productivity, and Engagement, 2020). In another survey conducted by an employment search service called FlexJobs, showed that 56 percent of workers said that their human resource department did not encourage conversations about burnout. (Reynolds, 2020). The World Health Organization is working on developing guidelines to help organizations with

burnout prevention strategies, shifting the responsibility of managing it away from the employee and towards the employer. (Moss, 2019).

Increasing Workload

In the face of stress, loss, and uncertainty, the demand for behavioral health services by Americans has skyrocketed during the pandemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reported that the percentage of American adults with symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder has increased from 36 percent to 42 percent since the start of the pandemic. (Vahratian et al, 2021). Similarly, the risk for substance use has been on the rise as well. In the early months of the pandemic, there was an increase of 18 percent in overdoses compared with the same period in 2019, with the trend continuing through the rest of 2020. (AMA, 2020). Since the start of the pandemic, every state has seen increases in opioid-related mortality. (Petterson et al, 2020). This is a situation that is expected to worsen in the coming years. Not only will it worsen for vulnerable populations by limiting their access to adequate care, but also for the nation's behavioral health workforce that is already experiencing severe burnout.

Organizational Climate

Organizational climate refers to the worker's perceptions of the work environment. Gaining the employee's perception of the work environment can be very valuable to an organization as it identifies and improves workplace deficiencies that could lead to high burnout rates among staff. Research shows that a supportive organizational climate is linked to employee satisfaction and motivation, as well as reduced pressure. (Allen, 2021). A study concluded that job-related stress places significant impact on organizational climate and the employee's intention to stay with the organization. (Lee et al, 2016). Research has extensively shown that

low retention rates are linked to high job burnout rates. When employees are faced with higher

levels of job-related stressors, then ultimately burnout, their intention to quit rises

significantly.(Zeytinoglu, 2016). Therefore, with naturally highly stressful work environments,

behavioral health organizations must work to lower their employees' stress levels by creating a

favorable organizational climate to positively impact their employees' perceptions, strengthen

their commitment to the organization, and increase their retention rates.

Consequences

Physical and Emotional Impact

Burnout has an emotional and physical impact on workers. Burnout can have lasting

consequences on a worker's physical and mental health state, including hypertension, insomnia,

depression, anxiety, and substance use. (SAMHSA, 2020). In 2021, nearly 79 percent of all

workers had reported experiencing work-related stress and burnout, presenting a major challenge

for employers and organizations nationwide. (Abramson, 2022). A study by the American

Psychological Association showed that 60 percent of workers said that work-related stress

caused them a lack of interest, motivation, and energy, while 44 percent said that they suffered

from physical fatigue. (Abramson, 2022). It has also impacted mortality rates, leading to 120,000

deaths and billions of dollars in healthcare costs each year. (Moss, 2019). Exacerbated by the

pandemic over the last few years, workers of all ages and from all fields and professions have

experienced heightened levels of stress, fatigue, and inefficacy, leading to all-time high levels of

burnout. It has been particularly challenging for the already strained behavioral health workforce,

such as the substance abuse and peer-support counselors at Valley Health Associates. Research

shows that burnout in behavioral health leads to lower levels of engagement and productivity

from the worker, causing them to more likely leave their jobs. (Morrison, 2022).

In recent years, research has directly linked the high rates of turnover among behavioral

health workers to emotional distress and burnout. (Sherman et al, 2017). This is because they

work under some of the most stressful and challenging conditions. The work of most behavioral

health workers requires the ability to develop empathic relationships with clients. It also requires

a tremendous amount of emotional involvement, placing them at a dangerous risk of being

emotionally drained. In many addiction treatment centers, like Valley Health Associates,

counseling often serves as one of the primary tools of treatment. This demand of human

interactions and listening to other people's despair, mounting burdensome paperwork, and

increasing caseloads add up over time and lead to professional and personal burnout. (Green,

2016). Dr. Kirk Bowden, president of the Association for Addiction Professionals (NAADAC),

said that it is also especially difficult for substance abuse counselors, estimated that more than 50

percent of them are themselves in recovery. (Burnout within the Addiction Recovery Industry,

2019). While the recovering counselors are uniquely qualified to help their clients in recovery, it

also puts them at a greater risk for professional and personal burnout, or worse, relapse.

Overwhelming Workloads

The demand for behavioral health services has reached unprecedented levels in the last

few years. 52 percent of behavioral health agencies have seen an increase in the demand for

services. (The National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2022). Growing caseloads, paperwork,

and lack of administrative support have increased the behavioral health worker's workload.

Taking on additional clients because of chronic staff shortages, working overtime and under

pressure has contributed to chronic workplace stress felt by those workers. In an conducted by

USA TODAY with half a dozen behavioral health workers, they all said that their professional

lives have been the most challenging ever since the start of the pandemic, and that every one of them has experienced symptoms consistent with burnout. (Dastagir, 2021).

Project Description

This capstone project comprises two main components: research and survey development. The research component involves reviewing existing studies on burnout among behavioral health workers and conducting interviews with the executive director and other staff members of Valley Health Associates. The aim of this research is to identify key factors contributing to high burnout rates and to gain a better understanding of how these factors are perceived by staff members. The research findings are documented in a report and used to inform the development of an employee satisfaction and engagement survey.

The survey includes questions related to burnout, workload, company culture, job satisfaction, organizational support, and opportunities for growth and development. It is distributed anonymously to all staff members of Valley Health Associates via Google Forms. Once an appropriate timeframe has been given for completion, the results are collected and analyzed. The findings are then presented in a clear and comprehensive format for review by the agency's management team.

Project Justification and Benefits

The employee satisfaction and engagement survey developed by this project is an accurate and effective method for the agency to capture the organizational climate among staff. The main goal of this project is to effectively identify, address, and prevent burnout and to improve retention rates. It is also about improving overall employee experience, boosting productivity, improving workplace culture, etc. Currently, the management team at Valley

Health Associates is working on developing methods of effective communication between staff and management. The implementation of this employee survey adds the crucially important voice of employees to the process. A study conducted by the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology shows that a workforce that feels their suggestions and ideas are heard to be better performers and calls for organizations to provide employees the upper hand to communicate and express regarding challenges at their workplace without fear of reprisal. (Mahan, 2019). Recognizing burnout as an "occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress," the World Health Organization highlighted that while there are contributing factors of burnout at interpersonal and individual levels, organizational factors have been increasingly recognized as the primary drivers of burnout. (SAMHSA, 2022).

In a 2018 poll, a broad range of employees identified unfair workplace treatment, overwhelming workload, lack of role clarity, lack of communication and support from management, and unreasonable time pressure as the top five reasons for burnout. (Wigert & Agrawal, 2018). The findings of the poll are consistent with the findings of the report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, where the agency identified workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values as the six primary contributors to burnout. (SAMHSA, 2022). One of the primary recommendations by the agency to identify burnout within an organization is to create an assessment in the form of surveys, interviews, or questionnaires to include questions related to identifying the scope of each of the six factors as well as any issues of organizational climate and culture. The survey of this project has questions on each of six systemic factors identified above, making it an effective tool for the agency to spot proven signs of burnout among employees.

Any practices or processes implemented by the management team at Valley Health

Associates to attract, train, retain, and reward staff will require a clear understanding of the

workforce. A thoughtfully designed and conducted employee survey will provide management

an insight into issues facing their employees and affecting their retention rates. The survey will

reveal important information about employee perceptions that managers can use to improve its

organizational climate and culture and develop strategies to effectively address burnout within

staff. The mere act of the agency conducting an employee survey can send a positive message to

the staff that their opinions matter to management. If employees see that management is

committed and responsive to their concerns and suggestions for improvement will likely stay

longer with their organizations. (Managing Employee Surveys, 2022).

Expected Outcome and Assessment Plan

The expected outcomes of the project include gaining a better understanding of the

causes behind the high burnout rates and low job satisfaction among behavioral health workers,

identifying areas of concern within Valley Health Associates, and creating strategies to prevent

burnout and increase employee engagement and satisfaction. Another expected outcome is for

the agency's management team to receive increased knowledge and awareness of the issue with

the research findings and survey results as guide to the development of interventions and changes

to improve working conditions, support staff wellness, and promote retention. Ultimately, the

goal of this project is to create a more supportive workplace culture for behavioral health

workers at Valley Health Associates. The success of this project is measured by monitoring

changes in organizational practices and attitudes related to staff well-being and burnout

prevention and by whether the agency accepts the recommendations of conducting the survey on

a semi-annual basis.

Based on the research findings of this project, an employee satisfaction and engagement survey is an effective tool in addressing the burnout phenomenon. The survey developed by this project provides an anonymous and confidential platform for staff members to express their opinions and feedback. It was designed to gather data on various factors contributing to burnout, including workload perception, job satisfaction, experience with burnout, and perceptions of the agency culture. The survey results are to be analyzed and presented to the management team at Valley Health Associates, who will be recommended to use the date provided by the research component and the employee survey to identify areas of improvement and develop strategies to address burnout among staff members. By using the survey results to inform their efforts, the management team will be able to take tailored concrete steps towards preventing burnout and improving the well-being of their employees.

Implementation

The implementation plan for this capstone project involves the research component and the development of the employee satisfaction and engagement survey. The research component is conducted in two phases, a literature review, and interviews with staff members and other behavioral health workers to identify the contributing factorings. The findings are the research components and are then used to develop the survey, which is sent and conducted anonymously by all staff members. It was agreed on by the executive director of the agency to start collecting survey responses on February 24th. Each employee was electronically sent the link to the survey and asked to participate. Employees were allotted a two-week period to participate and send in their responses. The survey responses were reviewed for analysis and evaluation to identify patterns and trends. Organized in clear and detailed manner, the results were presented to the leadership team at Valley Health Associates to demonstrate employee perceptions, areas of

concern and improvement, along with the recommendation to implement the survey on a semi-

annual basis. The leadership team is responsible for implementing the recommendation in a way

that ensures continued improvement in employee satisfaction and engagement.

Task	Timeline	Parties Involved	Materials/ Services Needed	Deliverables
Research data/statistics on employee burnout	By February 10th	Mentor, Student, counselors in the field	Library space, laptop	Data on the importance of the project, benefits for agency
Survey Development	February 23rd	Mentor, student, capstone instructor	Library space, laptop	Employee satisfaction & engagement survey
Check in with mentors	Ongoing, bi-weekly	Mentor, student	Laptop, phone	Meeting notes, feedback
Distribute survey	On February 24th	Student	Laptop	Responses from staff
Review survey results	On March 3rd	Student	Laptop	NA

Project Results

The expected outcome and results of the project were to gain a better understanding of the contributing factors leading to burnout among behavioral health workers, including the employees at Valley Health Associates, and to provide the executive management team with data-backed research into the issue to increase awareness and help prevent burnout among its staff. Using the survey to assess the level of burnout and job satisfaction among staff, the project aimed at providing valuable information to identify areas where improvements could be made to reduce burnout rates and improve retention.

The results of the survey suggest that there are several concerning issues related to burnout and employee engagement among the staff members at Valley Health Associates. Specifically, 75 percent of the participants had been with the agency for less than a year, which could indicate a high turnover rate. Additionally, 20 percent felt that their job came with unreasonable time pressure, 12 percent did not see positive outcomes in light of their work, and 12 percent felt overwhelmed by their caseloads, all of which are factors that can contribute to burnout. The majority of respondents (62 percent) felt that staff shortages had been an issue at the agency, which could lead to increased workloads and stress. Finally, 25 percent had struggled with burnout in their line of work, and 50 percent had personally experienced burnout, indicating a significant problem with burnout among staff members at the agency.

Overall, while the results suggest that there are several concerning issues related to burnout and job satisfaction at Valley Health Associates, the project was successful in identifying these issues and providing data-backed research to help prevent burnout among staff members. The management team can use the survey results to develop targeted interventions that address the specific factors contributing to burnout and improve job satisfaction among staff

members. By addressing these issues, Valley Health Associates can work towards reducing burnout rates and improving staff retention and overall job satisfaction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research project on the high burnout rates among the behavioral health workforce has provided valuable insights into the contributing factors to burnout among behavioral health workers including employees at Valley Health Associates. The results of the employee satisfaction and engagement survey have identified several areas of concern related to job burnout and staff turnover, including unreasonable time pressure, overwhelming caseloads, and a shortage of staff. The survey results have also revealed that burnout is a real issue affecting a significant portion of Valley Health Associates, and that it can have a negative impact on job satisfaction and work outcomes.

Based on these findings from the survey and research component of the project, it is clear that addressing the issue of burnout is critical for improving staff retention and promoting job satisfaction at Valley Health Associates. The development of targeted interventions, such as increased support and resources for staff, improved workload management, and more effective communication, can aid in preventing and reducing burnout rates among staff members.

With the results obtained from the survey conducted during this project, it is recommended that the management team at Valley Health Associates implement the survey on a semi-annual basis to gather ongoing feedback to continue addressing and preventing burnout. By doing so, the agency can make data-backed decisions to improve employee satisfaction, work culture, and communication to create a supportive and healthy work environment. It is imperative to prioritize the well-being of the behavioral health workers at the agency and

elsewhere to ensure that employees can provide the best care possible for their clients and

patients. By taking proactive steps to address this issue, Valley Health Associates can create a

more positive work environment and retain a talented and dedicated workforce. Overall, this

research project has provided a strong foundation for further efforts by the management team to

address the issue and promote a healthier and more positive work environment.

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