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Preventing Homeless Provider Burnout

Airam M Gutierrez Gonzalez

A Capstone Project for the Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Science

Introduction

For my capstone project I focused on bringing awareness to College Corps fellows ages 20-30, about the causes of homelessness, the costs of burnout, and a few self-care practices to prevent burnout. College Corps is a first-of-its-kind initiative launched in partnership with California colleges and universities deploying over 10,000 College Corps Fellows to work in K-12 education, climate action, and food insecurity. College Corps fellows must be enrolled full-time for a whole academic year and maintain good academic standing to stay eligible for up to \$10,000 in a living allowance throughout the service term and an educational award that fellows receive after completing 450 hours of service. These fellows are at high risk for burn out since they are attending college full-time and tackling some issues that they may have a personal connection to. I experienced burnout firsthand as a part of the first-ever College Corps cohort 2022-2023. I faced feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, and even depression. This is why I developed a one-time workshop and presented it during one of our biweekly meetings, at the Service Learning Institute. In my workshop for 2023-2024 College Corps fellows working against food insecurity, I introduced my service site, California State University of Monterey Bay Community Health Engagement (CSUMB CHE), whose mission is to enhance the health and wellness of low-income and homeless individuals through community health engagement and education in partnership with local service providers and I focused on causes of homelessness. I described the costs of burnout and I ended the workshop by suggesting some self-care tips to avoid burnout.

Needs Statement

As part of the very first cohort of College Corps, I endured many of the growing pains that came with it being the first time the program was in effect. I completed my hours with

CSUMB CHE's outreach team where we provided services to the houseless population of Monterey Bay and San Benito County. We provided free vital document vouchers and held tabling events with free clothes and food from the food bank. We conducted Coordinated Assessment and Referral System (CARS) services. During these assessments, clients are vulnerable with their social worker and provide intimate information regarding their living situation, any substance abuse, and/or mental illnesses. These services were sometimes emotionally demanding. I felt a personal connection with CHE's clients. For these reasons, I believe I experienced burnout. These stressors are inevitable when serving, but can lose their severity when approached mindfully. On top of emotional availability, a College Corps Fellow working with the homeless must accomplish 450 hours of service throughout one school year, meanwhile being enrolled in university classes full-time. Therefore, these students are vulnerable to academic fatigue, emotional fatigue, and burnout. There is a need for College Corps workshops that address burnout and provide tools to prevent it. Therefore, I developed a one-time workshop for the fellows in my pod, designed to bring awareness to the causes of homelessness, the cost of burnout, and some self care practices to prevent burnout.

This January 2024, I watched as the homeless providers I worked with prepared to perform the Point-in-Time (PIT) Count. It is a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. As of 2022, it was estimated that around 580,000 people experienced homelessness on any given night in the United States alone. That year, California had one of the highest homeless populations in the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), California accounted for around 27% of the total homeless population in the country with approximately 161,548 individuals experiencing homelessness.

Individuals experience homelessness for many reasons. It is vital for those providing services to learn about these reasons before working with these individuals. According to Short (2023) there are on average more female veterans experiencing homelessness than male veterans. This points to gender discrimination playing a role in homelessness. Additionally (Caton, et al, 1994) point to a government report that stated 1 in 20 severely mentally ill experience homelessness. Since mental illness is another prevalent cause among homeless individuals, it becomes difficult for homeless providers to assist these individuals without the proper processing. Many women who are homeless have been abused and/ or are running from an abusive partner (Long, 2015). This points to intimate partner violence being another cause of homelessness, and a very triggering one for service providers who have any experience with domestic violence. Overall, most people experiencing homelessness have no other option but to live on the streets, in tents, in their cars, or in homeless shelters.

Burnout is an issue for those who work as homeless service providers. It is characterized by Groggel (2022) as emotional fatigue and detachment with intensive stress. Emotional fatigue refers to a state of mental and physical weariness resulting from involvement in emotionally demanding situations. Compassion fatigue is defined as exhaustion of the body and mind experienced by those working with sick and/or traumatized people. Compassion fatigue creates apathy or indifference toward the suffering (McVety, 2021). Although apathy can be a useful tool for those seeing such difficult cases, it could also be detrimental to individuals experiencing emotional fatigue. Burnout is detrimental to a person's well-being. Some of the costs of burnout include lack of sleep and weakened immune systems.

Self-care is vital for individuals working as social workers and for the homeless population they serve because self-care is contagious. Leader self-care is positively correlated

with employee health (Klug, et. al, 2022). College Corps fellows placed in leadership roles, could benefit from self care and subsequently those whom they work with could benefit as well. Boundaries are especially crucial for social workers working with the homeless population, given the unique challenges and sensitivities of this context. Work calls and/or issues can violate familial boundaries. (Hunter et. al, 2019). This is also true about work issues violating college corps fellow boundaries.

Mindfulness, derived from Buddhist psychology, is focusing one's attention on the present moment, emotions, and sensations without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2015). It includes breathing practices which is a form of self-care that can be used to combat stressful feelings that lead to burnout, which is highly common in social work. One study on female undergraduate students demonstrates that those with low mindfulness portray more depressive symptoms and suicide ideation. Meanwhile, high mindfulness lowered overall scores on a perceived stress test. It proved the vital role that mindfulness in college campuses have in reducing suicide rates (Anastasiades, 2017). Without mindfulness, the emotional toll of social work may lead to things worse than burnout as social workers regularly encounter distressing situations and feelings. Mindfulness practices can be implemented into a student's life through exercise, and/or exploring the outdoors. One technique that I shared during the workshop I conducted for College Corps fellows working in food insecurity implements both. Taking a break when stressed, going on a walk, picking a color, and counting all the things you see that are the same color can reduce stress and promote gratitude.

Overall, this project's goal is to reduce burnout among College Corps fellows working in food insecurity fields. There is a need for this because work burnout leads to social worker turnover and there is a serious need for social workers in this field. The purpose of this project

was to bring awareness to College Corps fellows about the causes of homelessness, the costs of burn out, and the ways they can prevent it.

Theory

The Burnout Theory by Christina Maslach is a work place stress phenomenon characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Dr. Maslach argues that burnout can be caused by unfairness, too much work load and not enough resources. She also promotes that a healthy workplace includes a sustainable workload, autonomy, and recognition. Maslach speaks on the costs of burnout to humans such as long-term stress and health problems.

This theory proves the importance of my workshop. Having the conversation with College Corps fellows about burnout can be the difference between them reaching their breaking point. College Corps fellows are vulnerable to emotional fatigue. They are full-time students who must complete 450 hours of service for less than minimum wage, all while juggling the emotional turmoil that the service site holds and maintaining a good academic standing. This can result in so many negative outcomes, one being burnout. A healthy work environment can help battle the feelings of stress and burnout that so many College Corps fellows feel while trying to complete their service hours.

Consideration of Diversity

I presented my project to a group of California State University Monterey Bay College Corps fellows working against food insecurity. This group was made up of four Hispanic, and one Caucasian, four females and one male, two seniors, two juniors, and one freshman. My participants represented the CSUMB's population very well. Based on CSUMB's Institutional Assessment and Research Website, the most recent term's fast facts about race/ethnicity, 29% of the student population identifies as white, 46% as Latino, and 8% as two or more races.

According to the gender facts, 61% of students identify as female, 39% as male, and 1% non-binary. As for student levels, freshmans take up 19% of the population, sophomores 10%, juniors 25%, and seniors 33%. Some other facts include, 48% of the student body being first-generation college students, and 50% are underrepresented minorities.

The project was designed to accommodate all CSUMB students, who must do service learning as a requirement for graduation. Since College Corps students must complete a large amount of service hours on top of all their other responsibilities, I made sure that the workshop I presented to them was a worthwhile topic that they could benefit from. Since half of the population identifies with being underrepresented, and therefore probably lower income, the self care methods I recommended were all affordable and accessible. Such as breathing and walking outdoors. I also made sure to provide a trigger warning before speaking on some causes of homelessness such as intimate partner violence.

Learning Outcomes

I designed a one time workshop for College Corps fellows who are currently working within food insecurity focused service sites and coming across individuals who might be experiencing homelessness. The workshop had three learning outcomes:

1. Participants will be able to list 3 causes of homelessness.
2. Participants will be able to list 3 costs of burnout.
3. Participants will be able to list 3 ways they will practice self-care to reduce burnout.

Methods

Location and participants

This project was conducted at The Service Learning Institute of California State University of Monterey Bay in Seaside, California. Out of five of the participants two were in person and three tuned in virtually. These College Corps students are encouraged to attend pod meetings provided to them by student leaders every other week. I reached out to the leader of the food insecurity pod meetings so that I could present to their students. All of the participants of my project were college students, serving the food impoverished community in Monterey County. They were mostly female identifying, hispanic, and college aged students.

Procedures and Materials

My project consisted of a one-time workshop. I created the workshop using a Canva template which I downloaded to google slides. I prepared a one hour presentation for my participants. I introduced myself to the participants as a College Corps fellow. I also introduced CHE, the organization I was a part of. I shared my experience as an intern. Then I began with my learning outcomes.

First, I gave a trigger warning before I presented some causes of homelessness. I included poor mental health, race, gender discrimination, and intimate partner violence as just some of the possible causes of homelessness. I put these all in one slide with a few words describing each.

Second, I spoke on burn out. I shared some of the costs of burnout. I listed feeling drained, not being able to cope, not being able to sleep, being sad, angry, irritable, likely to use more alcohol and/or other substances, being susceptible to heart diseases, and having a low immune system as some things they might experience if they became burnt out.

Next, I defined mindfulness and suggested some self care activities that prevent burn out. I suggested and gave examples of things to do outside, like going on a walk and pointing out things of the same color. I also suggested moving, and some breathing exercises. I conducted an

assessment at the end of the workshop for the participants to showcase the knowledge they gained from my presentation. I formulated three different questions for my three different learning outcomes. One was formulated as an open-ended question and two as multiple choice.

Results

The first learning outcome of my capstone project's workshop was that participants would be able to list three causes of homelessness. To assess this, I set up a Google form assessment. I asked the participants to fill out the form immediately after the one-time workshop presentation. The first question was in a long answer test format. I asked, "What are two causes of homelessness mentioned?" The participants were to list what they recalled from the presentation. There was a possibility of two points for this question. 60% of the participants listed two causes of homelessness mentioned in the presentation and therefore received two points out of two points for this question. 20% of the participants listed one cause mentioned in the presentation and one not mentioned therefore received one point out of two points for this question. The last 20% percent only listed one of the causes mentioned in the presentation therefore received one point out of two points for this question. Since one point signifies a passing grade, 100% of the participants achieved the first learning outcome.

The second learning outcome was that participants would be able to list three things about burnout. To assess this, I asked the question "Which one of these is true about burnout? Choose all that is true." The options were "You are likely to get sick if you are burnt out." "Boundaries are for losers." "You'll get better at your job if you push yourself to a breaking point." and "It is hard to sleep when you are burnt out. This affects your health." Participants were to select "You are likely to get sick if you are burnt out." and "It is hard to sleep when you are burnt out. This affects your health." Zero out of five participants selected both outcomes.

However, three participants selected “You are likely to get sick if you are burnt out” and two participants selected “It is hard to sleep when you are burnt out. This affects your health.” 100% of the participants selected one correct answer but disregarded the second although the question indicated that they were to choose all that were true about burnout. This learning outcome was fully met, with 100% of the participants passing the question for learning outcome two.

The third learning outcome was that participants would be able to list three forms of self-care they would implement to prevent burn out. The question read “Which one of the following is the least helpful to reducing stress long term? Which one of these was not mentioned?” The options were “Going outside.” “Working out” “Breathing” and “Self Medicate (drugs, alcohol)” with the correct answer being “Self Medicate. (drugs, alcohol)”. One participant selected “Going outside” and another selected “Working out”. Three participants selected the correct answer “Self Medicate (drugs, alcohol)” leaving us with three out of five correct answers. This learning outcome was partially met with 60% of the participants passing.

Discussion

The focus of my capstone project was to teach College Corps fellows the importance of self-care when serving the community. The second learning outcome was the most successful. All of the participants selected at least one right answer. The project was also successful because it introduced the idea of workshops to the second cohort of College Corps fellows. The pod leader often has difficulty coming up with meeting ideas for our biweekly College Corps meetings so this helped her fill up that meeting time. The topic of the workshop was interesting to its participants because it was about them and their struggles. It was good for them to see that they were not alone in their service. It was also interesting for them to hear what fellow corps members are doing to relieve the stress that comes with their service positions.

The last learning outcome was not fully met. One of the limitations found was the time I had to present a workshop. I had to fit it into a one hour meeting time. With more time, it could have been more interactive. Even though my project was not fully successful, I believe that it opened people's minds to the difficulty of working with houseless individuals, and the necessity of self-care, and helped people realize that they are not alone by sharing stories of burnout. It also reminded the participants of some ways they can implement mindfulness in their routine. If I were to implement this workshop again, I would make it more interactive by asking for testimonials from the participants to further create community, I would also share more of my experience with burnout to create rapport with the participants. Furthermore, I would have to split up my workshop into several days to fit within the one hour meeting time.

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