Frontline Staff Wellbeing Survey

StreetSmart Community
Partner Insights

February 2026
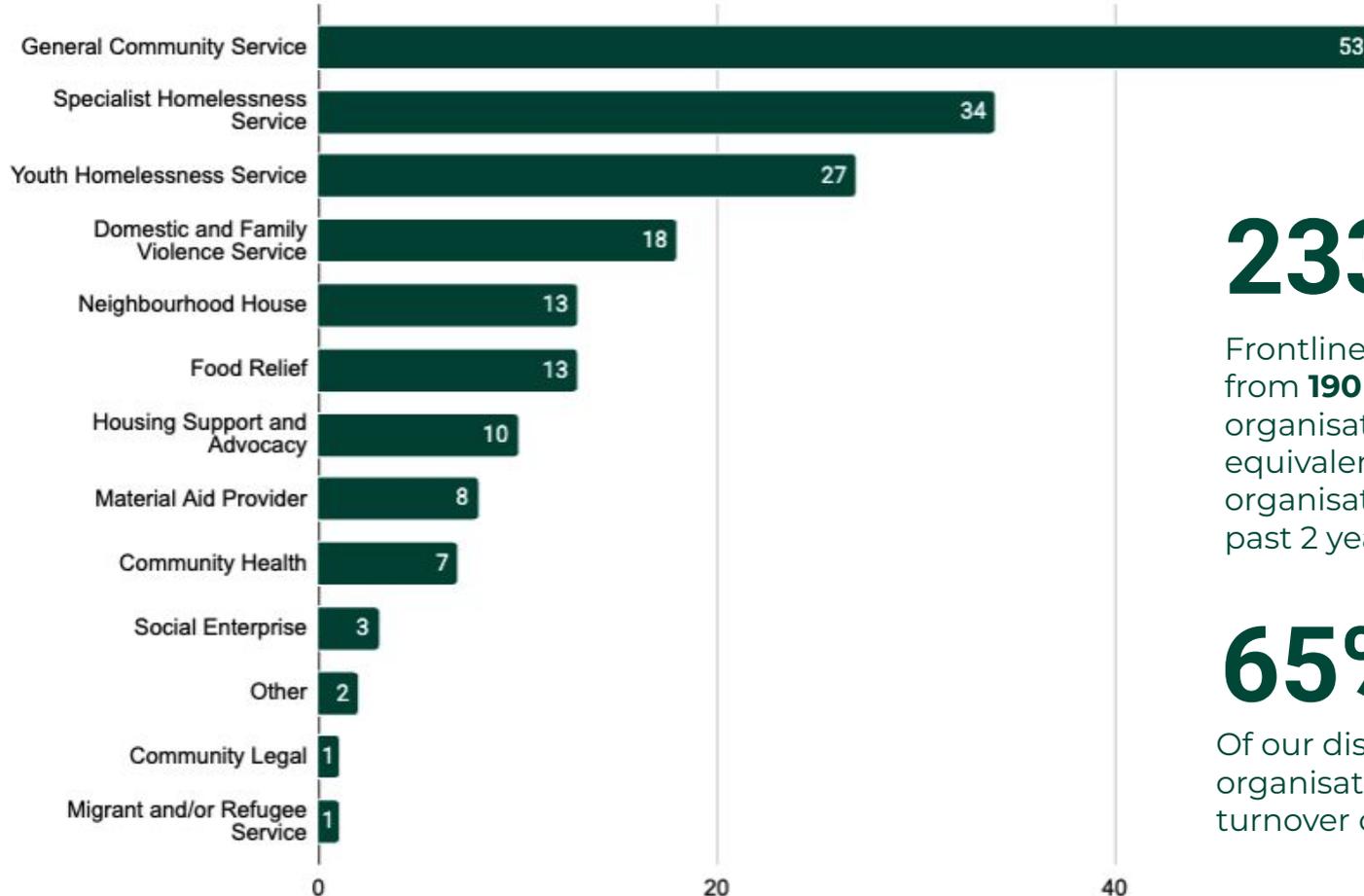
Why this survey & Why Us

StreetSmart has over **20 years of experience in seeking out and supporting** smaller, grassroots organisations on the frontline of homelessness in communities right across Australia.

This piece of research **profiles voices from right across the homelessness ecosystem**, providing unique, invaluable insights.

It's no secret that the community sector is **buckling under growing demand and complexity**. We wanted to understand what that looks like and the impacts on teams and clients alike, **so that we can mobilise our community and respond in ways that work.**

Who does this represent?

Category	Value
General Community Service	53
Specialist Homelessness Service	34
Youth Homelessness Service	27
Domestic and Family Violence Service	18
Neighbourhood House	13
Food Relief	13
Housing Support and Advocacy	10
Material Aid Provider	8
Community Health	7
Social Enterprise	3
Other	2
Community Legal	1
Migrant and/or Refugee Service	1

233

Frontline workers responded from **190** community organisations. This is a sample equivalent to 27% of the organisations we supported in past 2 years

65%

Of our distributions empower organisations with an annual turnover of less than $2 million

Key Themes

Throughout our research, 5 clear themes emerged:

1. Chronic underfunding and funding insecurity: services are operating in survival mode. Short-term contracts, tied funding, annual grants, and insufficient operational budgets. This directly affects staffing, wages, program continuity, and morale. Funding models are not aligned with workforce sustainability.

"The annual grant/contract funding is the hardest aspect to manage. There is no security for positions."
"We live year to year with uncertainty."

2. Demand & complexity in a broken system: demand has surged dramatically, while housing supply and specialist supports (mental health, Alcohol and Other Drugs, Domestic and Family Violence services) remain inadequate.

"We can only offer a band aid response."
"Workers often feel like they are working in a broken system."

Key Themes

3. Burnout, emotional labor and vicarious trauma: sustained exposure to crisis, trauma, aggression, and unmet need is eroding wellbeing. This is not simply "stress", it is sustained moral injury and secondary trauma compounded by systemic inadequacy.

"Burnout has been a big factor in staff turnover."
"Workers feel unable to take leave."
"Increased violence and abuse to workers."

4. Workforce sustainability and conditions: the sector struggles to recruit, retain, compensate, and properly support staff, both paid and volunteer. Workforce fragility is emerging as a sector-wide risk. Without structural investment in people, service capacity will continue to erode.

"Wages urgently need to be reviewed."
"We struggle to attract qualified Aboriginal staff."
"It's how to recruit younger people as volunteers that is challenging."

5. Nurturing protective factors: despite the pressures, there is extraordinary commitment, creativity, and internal peer care across organisations.

"A supportive and safe and flexible workplace with a great culture can go some way to minimising the impacts."
"Staff are our most valuable asset."

What we've learnt: staff wellbeing

94% Reported that sector challenges like increasing demand, case complexity and limited funding have **impacted staff wellbeing in the past year**.

3/5 On average, responders **scored their staff wellbeing a 3 out of 5**, when reflecting on the past year (1 indicating poor wellbeing).

56% Reported **staff are missing out on important Wellbeing Supports** that would help manage vicarious trauma and chronic stress.

Diving deeper: staff wellbeing

The below graph shows the top responses to the question "*What impacts on your staff wellbeing have you noticed in the past year?*". Responders overwhelming reported higher levels of stress (88%) burnout (52%) and longer hours (50%). We received 218 responses and multiple impacts could be selected.
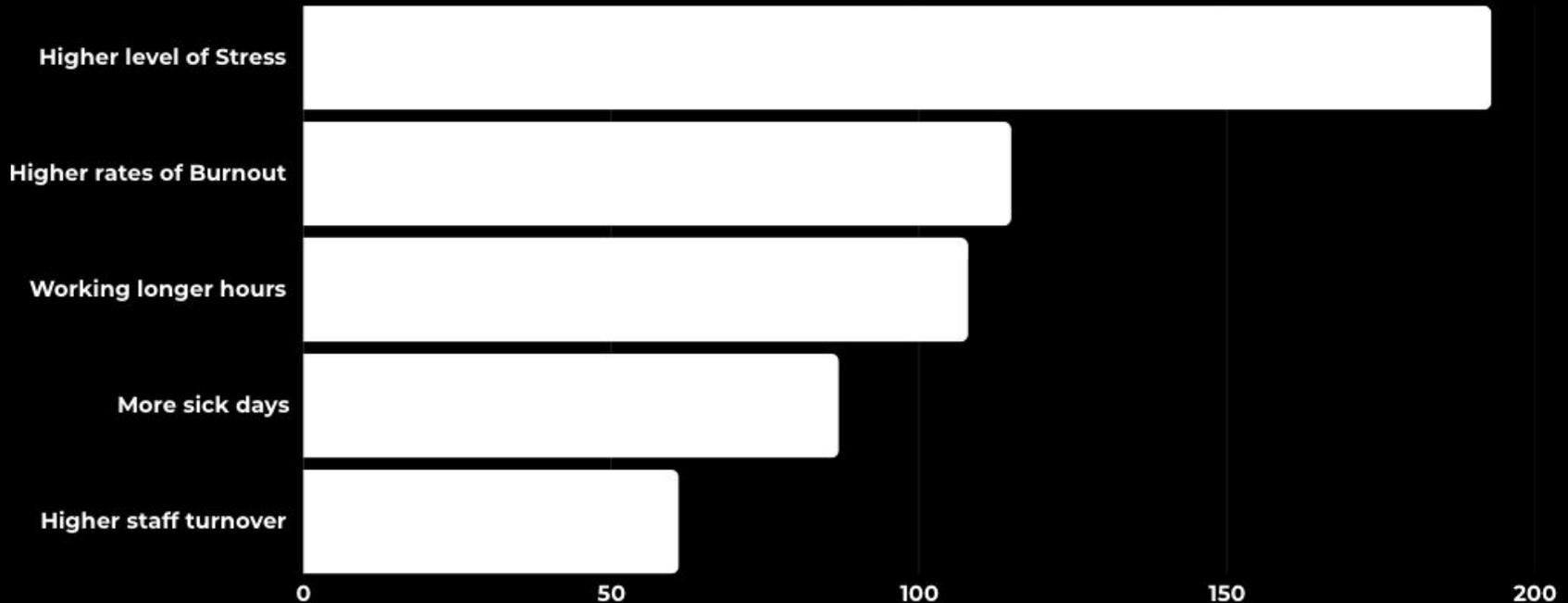
Diving deeper: impacts on team and clients

The below graph shows the top responses to the question "*What unavoidable consequences of reduced staff wellbeing have you noticed for your clients/community/service delivery in the past year?*". Responders overwhelming reported a reduced capacity to assist new clients (73%) longer wait times and delays to service delivery (62%) and a reduced quality and consistency in support provided to existing clients (50%). We received 203 responses and multiple impacts could be selected.
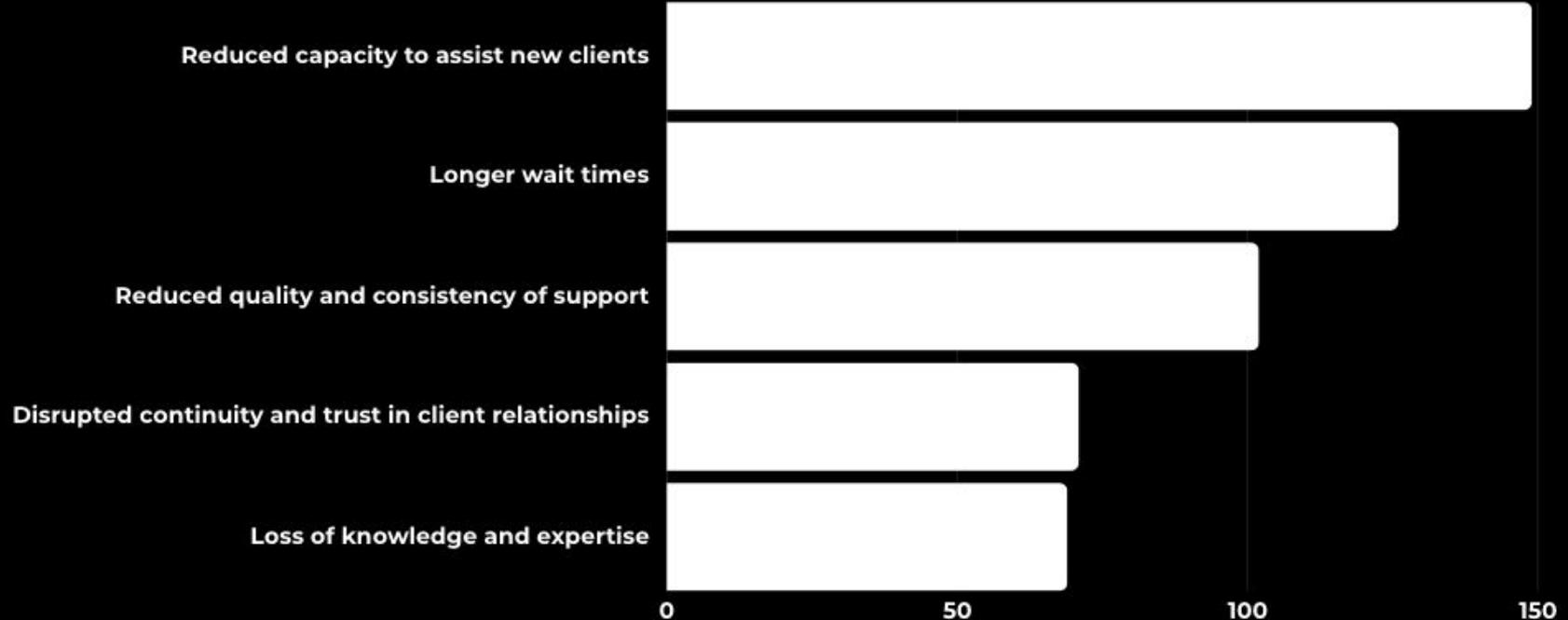
"I think our **biggest challenge is the sense of hopelessness** felt in not being able to meet the needs of all those referred to us. **It's a tough conversation to have with a single mum and her 3 kids** that they have to continue sleeping on the floor and storing food in an esky. We wish we could do so much more."

"Absolutely love the work that I do, but **I feel like I'm fighting against a system designed to keep people down**"

"**Frustration and feeling burnt out are ongoing issues** to deal with, as is vicarious trauma. I usually manage my self care pretty well, however the stresses and strains working in this sector definitely take a toll."

"The good people who fill these positions **wear their heart on their sleeve**, it's a tough person who can turn off the clock when someone is in desperate need **so often the support is ongoing well after official hours** - especially in smaller organisations."

What we've learnt: organisational capacity

33% Of respondents report that they are struggling to retain staff. **Lack of funding for staff wellbeing (28%)** was reported as the second top reason, behind **lack of operational funding (38%).**
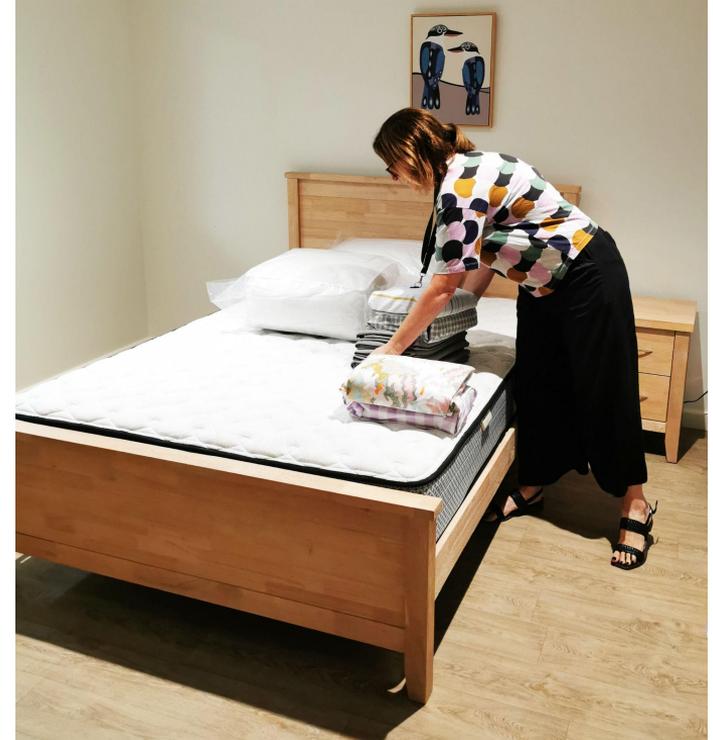
65% Reported **staff are missing out on Professional Development** opportunities due to limited funding and/or time to make these possible.

53% Reported that they **lacked current funding or initiatives** that allowed them to invest in staff wellbeing, training, and capacity building.

Solutions from the frontline

More Staff = Reduced Caseload
Frontline workers told us "we need more people". Staff wellbeing is seen as structurally dependent on workload relief. Without more staffing, PD and wellbeing initiatives feel like surface solutions

External Supervision, Clinical Supervision & Debriefing
There is an overwhelming demand for structured, professional supervision. Frontline workers told us they but struggle to afford consistent, quality external providers. This is seen as essential for preventing vicarious trauma and burnout.

Mental Health, Trauma & Conflict Training
We heard a consistent call for practical, frontline-relevant training to manage complexity and aggression.

Wellbeing Days and Team Connection
Staff want connection and recovery space - not everything has to be formal training. There is recognition that morale and cohesion protect against burnout.

Flexible & Individualised wellbeing support *(emerging need)*
There is a growing recognition that wellbeing needs differ across workers (especially across lived experience staff, volunteers, and leadership roles).
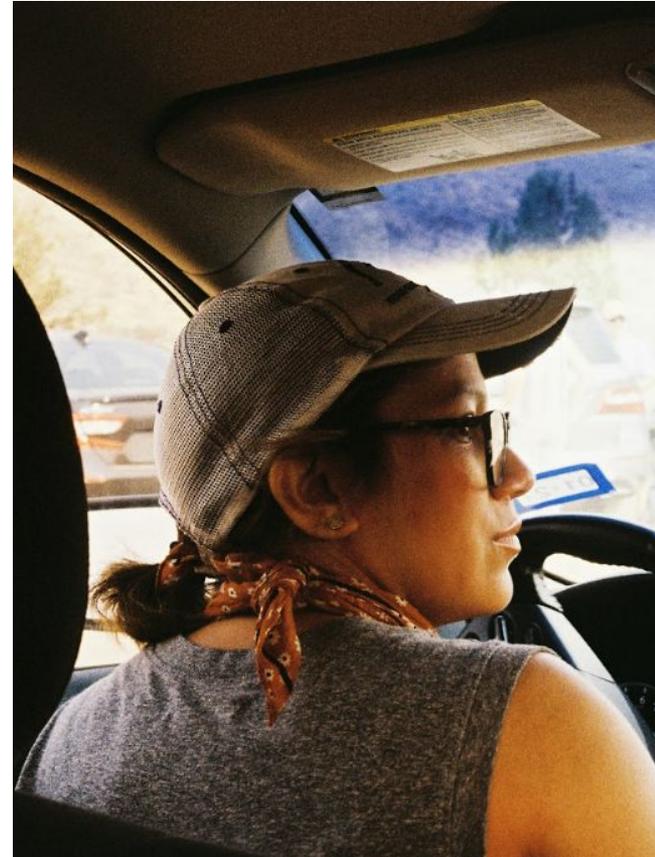
Voices from the frontline

We asked staff *"how would you invest in staff wellbeing and capacity building, with flexible funding?"*

"Conflict management, assertive communication and understanding diverse backgrounds"

"External Supervision for management and staff. Wage increase to align with the increase of living costs. An increase and stability of funding to employ more staff to ease and distribute caseloads on existing staff."

"Increased training in working with neurodiverse clients, increase team building and planning days to support team cohesion"

"Increased clinical supervision & support - especially group/team supervision/reflective practice"

Looking ahead

Frustration, Helplessness, and **Commitment despite everything,** are the three emotional states that appear again and again throughout survey responses.

Many respondents explicitly express gratitude, pride, and love for their work, alongside exhaustion and moral distress. **That tension is significant.**

This research has **sharpened our role and resolve** in investing in community organisations at the frontline of homelessness in Australia.