



STRENGTHENING LA COUNTY'S HOMELESS SERVICES WORKFORCE

Investing in Education
and People to Serve
the Community

FOREWORD

By Vanessa Rios, Senior Advisor, Workforce Development, Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority

As an advocate, advisor, and frontline worker at heart, I often think about the challenges workers face in the homelessness response system and frequently reflect on my younger self, having entered the sector nearly two decades ago. At the time our system was much smaller, and services looked different. A lot of lessons came from trial and error. Oh, the things I would tell that eager young adult—slow down, step back, listen, and remember to always remain a student.

The needs of people experiencing homelessness have not changed. However, documentation requirements and the difficulties of navigating complex systems to provide care have evolved to a degree where many workers cannot keep up with the demand within our ever-changing landscape.

In that sentiment, if we are honest, the homelessness response system alone cannot address the crisis playing out on our streets. We must lean into other systems to aid in our worker crisis. In this case, the education system plays a key role in ensuring that workers are equipped to provide care for individuals who are unhoused.

Los Angeles County is home to the largest body of community colleges in the country. The region also offers a wide range of private and public universities along with specialized career education for various industries. With their support and strategic investments, we can create career and learning pathways for noncredit, credit, and degree programming across higher education. Such efforts will better prepare workers to acquire and strengthen their skills as well as promote upward mobility in the workplace.

This report is such an important part of the sector. It is a weaving together of research, data, and intentional thought about the sector's workforce. May it serve as a guide to inform our system about what is needed, how to get there, and why collaboration with the region's education system is of utmost importance now more than ever.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The number of people experiencing homelessness in the United States on a single night in 2024 was the highest ever recorded. A total of **771,480 people – or about 23 of every 10,000 people in the United States were experiencing homelessness**. The nation's worsening affordable housing crisis, rising inflation, and stagnating wages, as well as the persisting effects of systemic racism, public health crises and natural disasters have led to this expanding crisis.

Los Angeles County is one of the most impacted regions, with **more than 75,000 unhoused people** enumerated in its 2024 Point In Time Count. While the number of people experiencing homelessness has remained steady over the past two years, the sheer magnitude of need has stretched its homeless response systems and its workforce to its limits. LA County's 8,000+ homeless services workers often face low and stagnant wages that fall short of the region's cost of living, inconsistent onboarding and training, and limited opportunities for career advancement. These challenges have led to an estimated **1,300 vacant positions** in the sector at any given time, with a majority being frontline/direct services positions. A shortage of frontline workers means reduced service capacity, heavier workloads for staff, and more frequent service interruptions for people experiencing homelessness.

Further, frontline staff often report that training and onboarding are of variable quality, with many staff placed into complex roles without sufficient preparation. Career growth is often informal, with few structured pathways or clear advancement criteria, including credentials and training. **Addressing LA's homelessness crisis will require an enhanced ability to attract, mentor, and retain frontline homeless services staff** and develop strategic partnerships to do so.

This report examines the sector's workforce challenges and **explores how community colleges can be an important partner in addressing training and onboarding gaps** experienced by new homeless services frontline staff.

“We are using the incredible capacity and talent of our institution at SMC to be one small part of the solution to the challenge of homelessness.”

Dr. Kathryn E. Jeffery,
Superintendent/President, Santa
Monica College (SMC)



This report's analysis is grounded in three core inputs:

- 1 Sector research from recent studies by KPMG, RAND, NAEH and others
- 2 Available labor market data and job posting analysis
- 3 A 2025 LDC Survey of frontline and supervisory staff in LA County's homelessness response system

Informed by the above data, this report is organized to deliver the following:



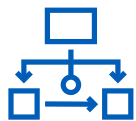
An overview of current **workforce gaps**, including barriers to entering, staying in, and advancing within the sector



An overview of how **Santa Monica College's Homeless Service Work Certificate program addresses these gaps**



Actionable recommendations for community colleges interested in adopting and adapting the model



Considerations for **broader system alignment**, recognizing that many barriers to student and workforce success fall outside the scope of community colleges

To address a number of these challenges, **Santa Monica College's Homeless Service Work Certificate program offers a structured pathway that prepares students to enter frontline roles.** The program covers high-priority competencies, such as trauma-informed care, housing systems navigation, crisis response, and self-care, and is designed to be accessible to working adults and individuals with lived experience of homelessness.

While SMC's certificate program does not address all system-level challenges, it represents a scalable model that can be expanded within SMC and adapted by other community colleges across the region and state. This report outlines strategies for doing so, including building peer networks across community colleges and strengthening employer partnerships. **By focusing on practical, entry-level workforce development, community colleges can play a critical role in strengthening the foundation of California's homelessness response system** by expanding and supporting the frontline workforce.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was developed in partnership between Santa Monica College (SMC) and the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) and was made possible through LAHSA's generous funding and commitment to strengthening the homelessness services workforce in Los Angeles County.

We are especially grateful to Vanessa Rios, Senior Advisor for Workforce Development at LAHSA, for her partnership and leadership throughout this effort. Her guidance helped shape both the vision for the Homeless Service Work Certificate Program and the direction of this report.

We also thank the frontline workers and supervisors who participated in the 2025 workforce survey. Their candid reflections and on-the-ground experience were essential in identifying the challenges and opportunities facing the sector.

Appreciation goes to the faculty and staff at Santa Monica College, whose dedication to educational equity

and student success led to the creation of California's first Homeless Service Work Certificate Program. Special thanks to the following for their leadership in launching and supporting this groundbreaking program: Dr. Kathryn Jeffery, Dr. Nancy Greenstein, Jason Beardsley, Dr. Patricia Ramos, Dr. Steven Sedky, Dr. Alisa Orduña, Leepi Shimkhada, Celina Alvarez, Aileen Huang, Dana Nasser, Dr. Susan Fila, Tia Dickson, Talesha Payne, Rene Robles, Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins, Ruth Casillas, Lisa Lewenberg, Mario Franco, Jenny Landa, and Jazmin Guzman. Their leadership has established a promising model for community colleges to play a stronger role in workforce development.

Finally, we recognize the students in the program—many of whom bring lived experience to their work—for their commitment, insight, and contributions to this growing field.

BACKGROUND

The number of people experiencing homelessness in the United States on a single night in 2024 was the highest ever recorded. A total of **771,480 people – or about 23 of every 10,000 people in the United States were experiencing homelessness**. The nation's worsening affordable housing crisis, rising inflation, and stagnating wages, along with the persisting effects of systemic racism, public health crisis and natural disasters have led to this crisis.

Los Angeles County has an estimated 75,000 people experiencing homelessness, nearly 70% of whom are unsheltered.

Los Angeles County has the second largest population of people experiencing homelessness in the United States, with an estimated **75,000 individuals—nearly 70% of whom are unsheltered—per the 2024 Point in Time Count**. To effectively address this crisis in Los Angeles and beyond, financial and human resource investments will be critical.

The homelessness response system in Los Angeles County spans over 4,000 square miles and includes many public and nonprofit agencies working together to implement services. According to RAND (2023) and KPMG (2022), the homelessness response sector workforce in Los Angeles County involves **more than 8,000 employees across approximately 200 nonprofit and governmental agencies, with over 1,300 unfilled positions**. This workforce spans frontline roles that directly support individuals across the homelessness continuum—from prevention and street outreach to interim housing, permanent housing, and supportive services. It also includes management and administrative positions that provide critical oversight and support in areas such as finance, human resources, operations, and strategic planning.

More than 8,000 people work in the homelessness response sector in Los Angeles County.

KEY HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

- **Prevention and Diversion:** Services that help households avoid homelessness through financial assistance, legal aid, or case management.
- **Street Outreach and Street Medicine:** Engagement of unsheltered individuals to build trust and connect them to housing, healthcare, and services.
- **Access Centers:** Walk-in hubs offering basic needs, assessments, and referrals through coordinated entry.
- **Interim Housing:** Temporary housing with case management services which is often low barrier and can range from seasonal shelters across the County, stabilization housing for people who have significant chronic illnesses and recuperative care for unhoused people who are leaving clinical settings and need ongoing clinical oversight.
- **Housing Navigation:** Assistance with documents, housing search, applications, and landlord outreach.
- **Time-Limited Subsidies:** Short- to medium-term rental assistance with case management to quickly exit homelessness.
- **Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH):** Long-term affordable housing with services for people with high needs
- **Supportive Services:** Individualized services (e.g., case management, health, benefits) to support housing stability.

TABLE 1 Common Job Types in the Los Angeles County's Homelessness Response Sector, 2025

CATEGORY	COMMON JOB TITLES
Frontline Roles	Case Manager, Outreach Worker/ Specialist, Housing Navigator, Social Worker, Resident Advisor, Mental Health Specialist/ Worker, Peer Support Specialist, Housing Specialist, Client Service Monitor, Community Health Worker, Client Ambassador, Intake Worker
Management Roles	Program Manager, Program Director, Supervisor, Executive Director, Operations Manager, Shelter Manager, Associate Director, Site Coordinator, Team Lead, Intake Coordinator, Counselor
Administrative Roles	Human Resources Specialist, Accountant, Data Analyst, Grants Manager/Coordinator, Contracts Specialist, Finance Manager/Analyst, Management Analyst, Compliance/Quality Assurance Specialist, Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Manager/Analyst, Development Manager/Coordinator

Frontline workers represent the largest share of the workforce and provide direct services to those experiencing homelessness. According to KPMG (2022), **69% of organizations identified Case Managers as their greatest hiring need, followed by 33% citing Outreach Specialists, with Program Managers ranked as the third most in-demand role.** KPMG (2022) has forecasted significant increases in workforce hiring needs across the sector.

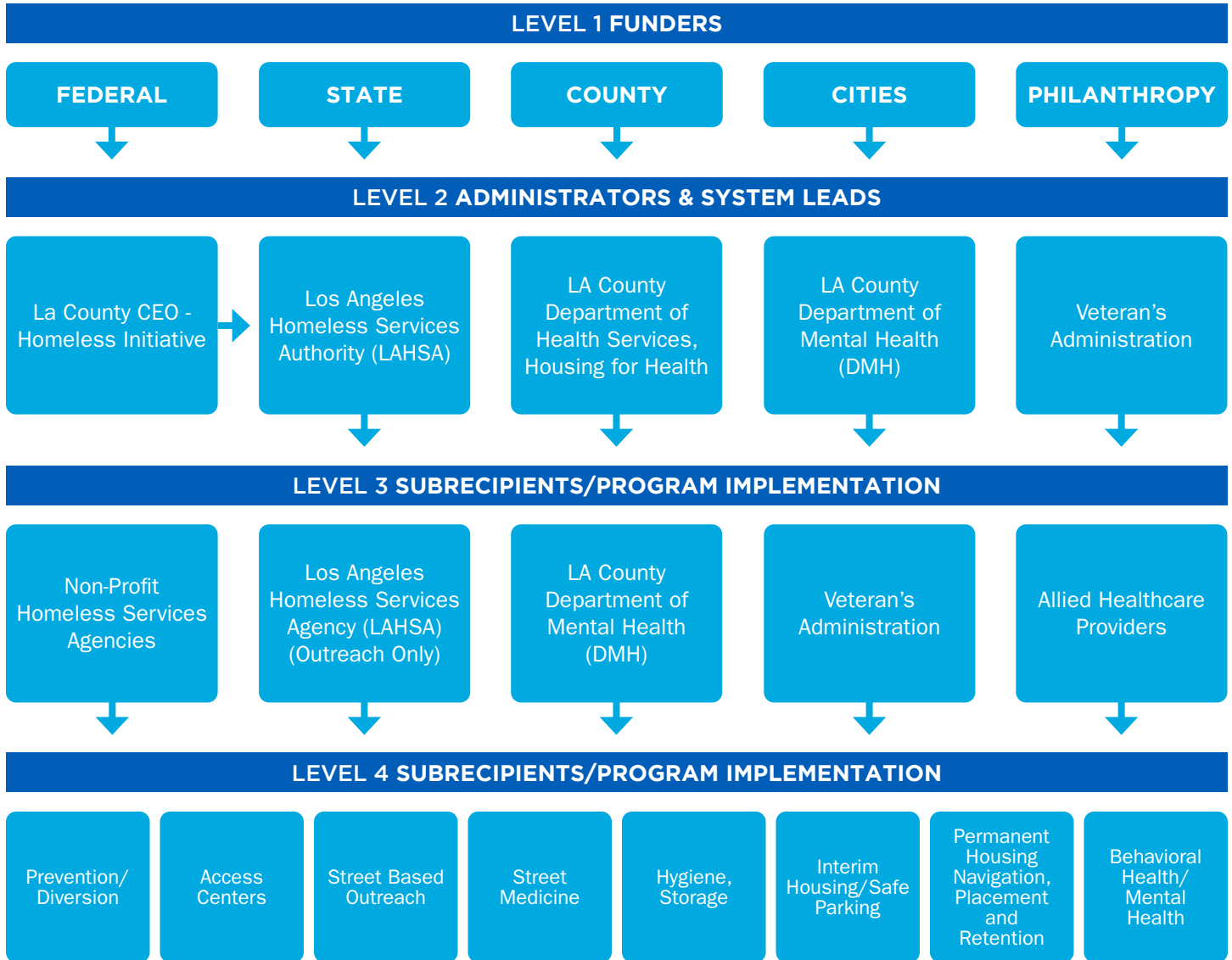
The landscape of employers in this sector is diverse, ranging from specialized nonprofits to large public agencies and coordinating entities.

TABLE 2 Key Employers in Los Angeles County's Homelessness Response Sector, 2025

TYPE OF ORGANIZATION	EXAMPLES
Nonprofit Service Providers	PATH, HOPICS, LA Family Housing, Volunteers of America (VOLA), The People Concern, Union Station Homeless Services, St. Joseph Center, Harbor Interfaith Services, Downtown Women's Center, etc.
Government Agencies	Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), Los Angeles County Homeless Initiative, Los Angeles County Departments of Mental Health, Health Services, City of Santa Monica, Public Social Services, Children and Family Services, City of Los Angeles, Veteran's Administration, etc.

The figure below outlines the multi-tiered structure of the homelessness response system in Los Angeles County, from funders and system administrators to frontline service providers. It illustrates the complex coordination required to deliver homelessness services across the region.

FIGURE 1 LA County's Homeless Services Sector by Role, 2025



Legend:

- **Level 1 – Funders:** Provide financial resources and set high-level priorities (e.g., government, health plans, philanthropy).
- **Level 2 – Administrators and System Leads:** Coordinate funding, set strategy, and oversee implementation across the region.
- **Level 3 – Subrecipients/ Program Implementation:** Deliver programs and services directly, through contracts or partnerships with system leads.
- **Level 4 – Direct Services/Frontline Programs:** Frontline programs supporting people experiencing homelessness, from outreach to housing.

**Note that some entities serve as both administrators and program implementers depending on program and service type. This system is supported by many entities including housing authorities, cities, Councils of Government (COGs), coordinated entry system and other coordination entities, and administration staff at all levels, among many others. This overview reflects the structure and roles as they exist today. Given recent and ongoing changes within the homelessness response system, these dynamics are subject to change.*

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE HOMELESSNESS SERVICES WORKFORCE

Los Angeles County's homeless services workforce is vital to addressing the homelessness crisis across the region. Over the past decade, not only has the crisis expanded, but so have the resources available to address homelessness. This has required the sector to grow exponentially without the foundational systems needed to onboard and continuously train its workforce. As a result, the workforce

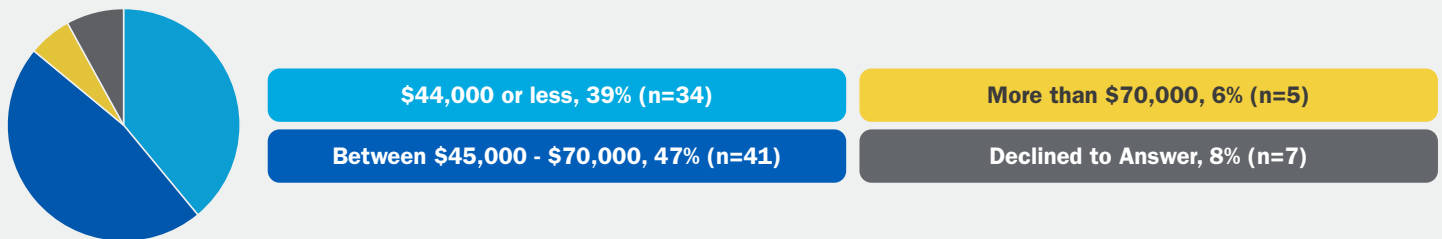
faces persistent barriers that limit sustainable growth, effective scaling, and adequate support. Drawing on findings from key sector reports and supported by data from LDC's 2025 survey of frontline and supervisory staff, this section outlines the most critical workforce gaps that impact the system's effectiveness. See Appendix 1 for the complete methodology.

LOW COMPENSATION AT WORKFORCE ENTRY

Compensation remains a fundamental barrier to workforce entry and retention. RAND (2023) identifies \$64,160 per year as the most applicable living wage benchmark for Los Angeles County, reflecting housing affordability and the need to avoid being cost-burdened. While lower estimates, such as \$47,360, capture basic subsistence, the \$64,160 figure more accurately accounts for the region's high cost of living, particularly housing. According to RAND, average annual earnings for frontline workers, including case managers, social workers, outreach workers, resident advisors, navigators, and mental health workers, range from approximately \$42,000 to \$57,000, falling short of the living wage benchmark. Lightcast

(2025) data further illustrate this gap; despite increases over the past years, the median advertised salary for homelessness-related frontline roles in Los Angeles County is about \$25.29 per hour, or just over \$52,000 annually. Although not representative of the broader sector, the LDC Survey reinforces RAND and Lightcast findings that low compensation is a major barrier. This figure displays the distribution of initial salaries reported by survey respondents. It shows that approximately 39% of respondents reported \$44,000 or less as their initial salary, below the self-sufficiency standard for Los Angeles County.

FIGURE 2 *Initial Salary Ranges, LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff, 2025*



Low compensation not only deters potential candidates, but it also increases turnover among those who enter the field but struggle to maintain financial stability in a high-cost regions like Los Angeles County. From the frontline worker perspective, not earning enough has material consequences, including stress, health concerns, and housing insecurity. These challenges make it difficult to

build a long-term career when staff themselves are living paycheck to paycheck and struggling to make ends meet, particularly among individuals with lived experience or those entering from other historically underpaid sectors.

Adding to the challenge, wages for comparable roles can vary significantly across agencies, contributing to sector-wide inequities and a dynamic of "agency hopping." Overall,

compensation—including both salary/wages and benefits—is not competitive with other sectors. Based on KPMG (2022), only 34% of survey respondents stated “good and/or competitive benefits package” as a top reason to continue working in the homeless services sector, despite

compensation being one of the most important factors to workers when seeking employment. According to KPMG (2024), 83% of employees indicated they would consider leaving the field for better compensation and benefits at a different organization.

HIGH BURNOUT AND SECONDARY/VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Homelessness services work can be emotionally demanding. Staff often experience the loss or death of clients with whom they have built close relationships. Many also encounter high levels of vicarious trauma, defined as emotional distress resulting from exposure to individuals who are currently experiencing or have previously experienced trauma. The effect of vicarious trauma builds over time and can lead to burnout and significant mental health challenges.

According to KPMG (2022), mental and emotional health concerns, along with a lack of job security, are key factors contributing to workforce attrition. KPMG (2022) also found that only 50% of frontline workers in Los Angeles felt physically safe on the job. Sector conditions frequently involve exposure to trauma and chronic crisis situations,

often with limited access to supports such as clinical supervision, mental health resources, or structured time off.

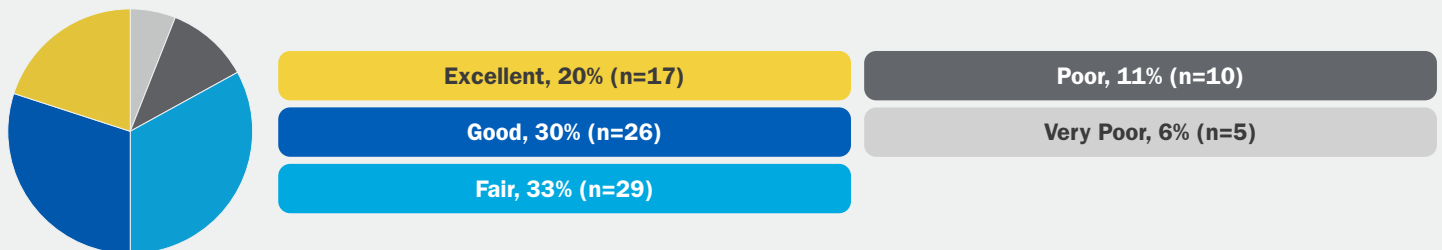
There are also subsector challenges, with various roles experiencing more trauma than others. In a recent National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) (2024) survey of homeless services providers across the country, street outreach and drop-in center staff were more likely than other homeless services workers to be stressed about their clients. This is likely because unsheltered clients often have more complex physical and mental health needs, increasing stress for staff who support them. While burnout was not directly measured in the LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff, it remains a widely recognized driver of turnover, low morale, and diminished quality of care.

INADEQUATE ONBOARDING/EARLY CAREER TRAINING

Staff often receive vastly different levels of training and preparation when first entering the sector, depending on their organization and role. Onboarding and early training, typically provided within the first weeks or months of employment, are inconsistent and frequently rated as inadequate. According to the LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff, many respondents rated the quality of

their initial training as “Fair” or worse (“Poor” or “Very Poor”), pointing to limited or uneven onboarding practices across the sector. This trend was evident across multiple service types—for example, 64% of respondents in Interim Housing/Shelter roles (n=14 of 22) and 50% of those in Outreach, Street Medicine roles (n=25 of 50) gave similarly low ratings.

FIGURE 3 *Early Career Training Rating, LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff, 2025*



KPMG (2024) notes that over 90 unique frontline job titles exist across the homeless system, often with unclear roles and responsibilities and minimal role-specific training. Workers reported being placed into emotionally demanding and complex roles—such as crisis de-escalation, coordinated entry navigation, or housing placement—without foundational preparation. Only 25% of organizations reported providing on-the-job training/ materials to train

their employees. According to KPMG (2022), 60% of Case Managers in focus groups called out “lack of training” as the biggest challenge. Additionally, 53% of the current workforce has less than two years of tenure, meaning employees are often learning from others who may not have fully mastered their roles. A prevalent “trial by fire” culture further compounds this issue, contributing to early job dissatisfaction and limited effectiveness.

LIMITED CAREER PROGRESSION PATHWAYS

The LDC Survey responses and sector reports alike describe an industry with few formal advancement pathways, particularly for critical frontline roles like Case Managers. Workers often move into new roles or titles without clear criteria for promotion, structured mentoring, or consistent skill development. Career advancement is

often limited due to new roles only becoming available due to promotion or turnover. KPMG (2022) found that advancement is often reactive, driven by organizational need rather than structured progression, performance recognition, or trainings/ certifications. Lack of career advancement is a major contributor to attrition.

SHORT-TERM FUNDING AND WORKFORCE INSTABILITY

Many homelessness programs in Los Angeles operate under short-term, one-time, competitive funding streams. This makes it difficult for providers to offer stable employment, invest in staff development, or build out workforce pipelines over time.

RAND (2023) and KPMG (2022) highlight that annual or pilot funding cycles discourage long-term workforce planning. Workers, in turn, often leave due to uncertainty about contract renewal or perceived job instability.

SKILLS NEEDED ARE NOT CONSISTENTLY DEVELOPED THROUGH TRAINING

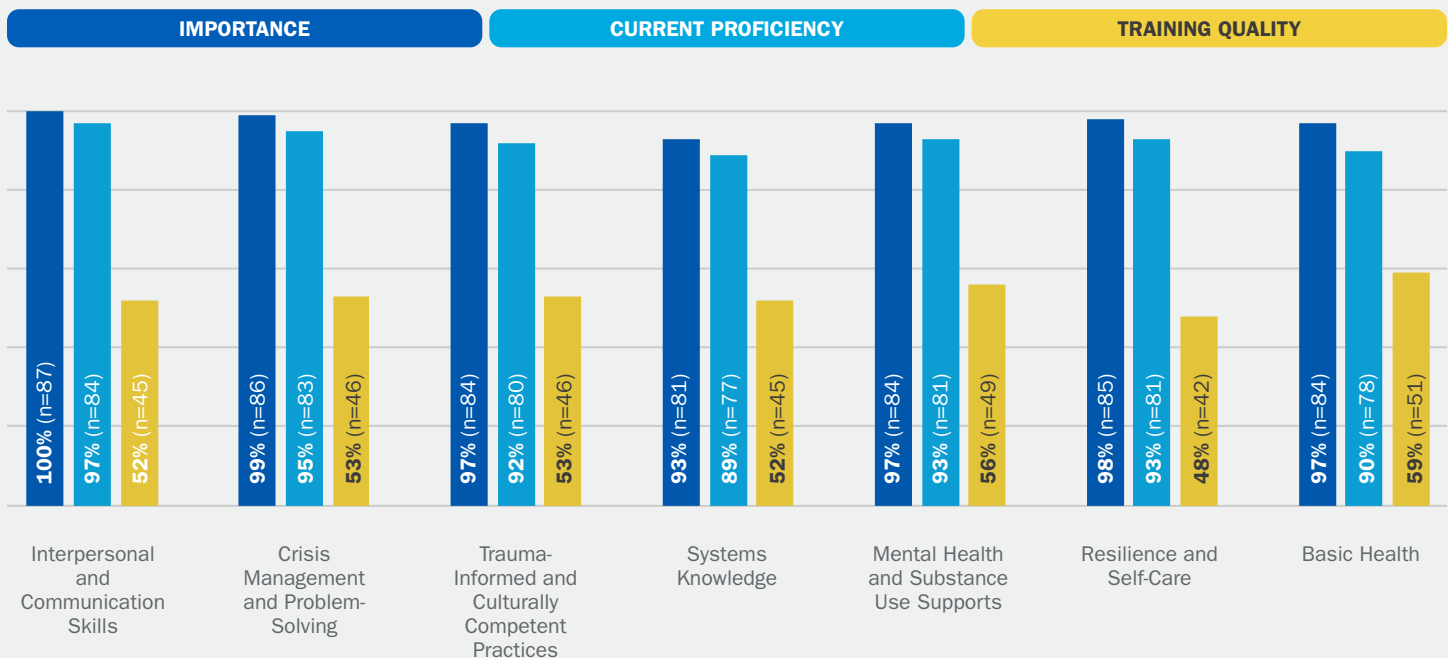
In addition to onboarding, staff require opportunities to continue developing key competencies throughout their tenure. However, many frontline workers report that structured, ongoing training is limited or lacking altogether.

The LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff asked respondents to assess a core set of frontline competencies by rating their importance, current proficiency, and the quality of related training. A consistent pattern emerged: while most respondents identified these

skills as “Very Important,” the quality of training was frequently rated as “Fair” to “Poor.”

Despite this, self-reported proficiency in these areas was relatively high, suggesting that many staff are gaining skills informally or through direct experience rather than through formal, competency-based training programs. Without coordinated and consistent development systems, frontline staff face uneven growth trajectories that vary significantly across organizations and roles.

FIGURE 4 Topic Importance vs. Current Proficiency vs. Quality of Training, LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff, 2025



ROLE MISALIGNMENT AND OVEREXTENSION

RAND (2023) also found that in some cases, workers report being tasked with duties that go far beyond their formal job descriptions—such as behavioral health triage, legal mediation, or clinical-level care. While some of these functions may be intended for referral, unclear protocols, inconsistent supervision, or limited access to partner services can result in frontline staff stepping

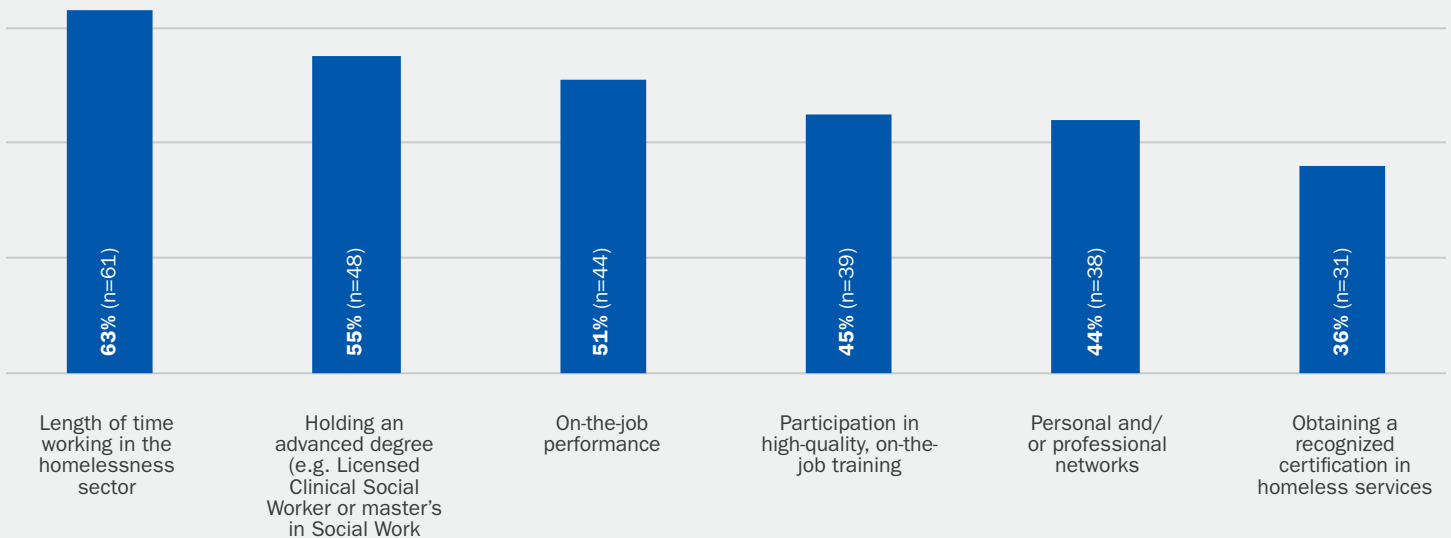
into roles beyond their scope. Without the appropriate training, compensation, or supervisory structure to support these tasks, workers become overstretched and at risk of burnout and negligence. These dynamics contribute to a mismatch between role expectations and available supports. This mismatch contributes to dissatisfaction, job-related challenges, and higher turnover.

ADVANCEMENT CULTURE AND THE LIMITED ROLE OF TRAINING

When asked which factors most influence advancement, LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff respondents identified length of time in the homelessness sector as the leading factor (63%, n=61), followed by having an advanced degree (55%, n=48) and on-the-job performance (51%, n=44). Training, professional networks, and obtaining recognized certificates were also valued by 45% (n=39),

44% (n=38), and 36% (n=31) of respondents, respectively. These findings reflect the perceived drivers of advancement within the sector and highlight how informal factors—such as tenure and on-the-job performance—are often seen as outweighing formal training or credentialing in influencing career progression.

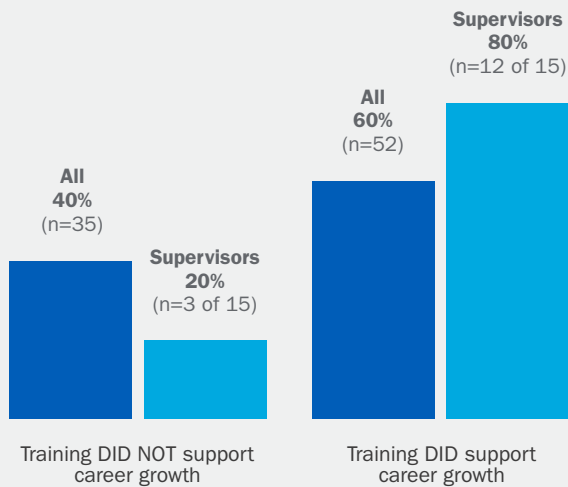
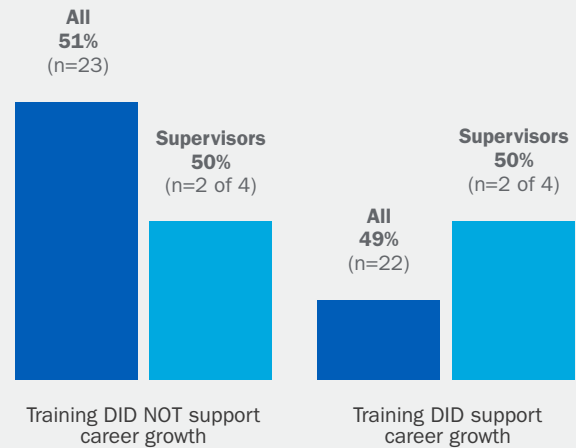
FIGURE 5 *Factors that Influence Career Advancement, LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff, 2025*



This trend underscores a disconnect between training investments and advancement opportunities. While respondents may value training, it is not consistently seen as a pathway to career mobility—particularly in comparison to more informal or subjective factors.

In the LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff, respondents were also asked whether the training they received supported their career growth—defined

as increased wages, responsibilities, or promotions. A significant portion selected “Neutral,” “Disagree,” or “Strongly Disagree,” indicating limited consensus that training leads to meaningful advancement. This concern was even more pronounced among Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) respondents: 51% (n=23) reported that training did not support their career growth. A total of 87 individuals completed the survey.

FIGURE 6 Career Growth Supported by Training, LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff, 2025**FIGURE 7 Career Growth Supported by Training BIPOC, LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff, 2025**

Barriers to career advancement are particularly acute for BIPOC staff. According to KPMG (2024), approximately 80% of BIPOC employees reported experiencing barriers or discrimination when trying to grow within their organizations.

This trend has serious implications for workforce pipeline strategies. If organizations do not prioritize or reward credentials in hiring or promotion, then training programs—regardless of quality—may not yield meaningful advancement outcomes unless accompanied by organizational culture change.

LACK OF STACKABLE, SECTOR-RECOGNIZED CREDENTIALS

Even for staff who value skill development, the sector currently offers few structured pathways to move from entry-level roles into mid-level or specialized positions. Most existing training is non-credit-bearing, not formally transferable, and lacks alignment with formal academic or workforce systems.

KPMG (2022) notes that workers often have to piece together learning experiences on their own. Tuition reimbursement and credit articulation opportunities are rare, further limiting access to professional advancement and the long-term professionalization of the workforce.

NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF THE HOMELESSNESS SECTOR

The homelessness services sector plays a critical role but continues to face a negative public image. It is often viewed as under-resourced and ineffective in addressing homelessness at scale. KPMG (2022) found that 57% of focus group participants held negative views of the sector, citing low pay for demanding work and frustration with its

limited impact in Los Angeles County. These perceptions undermine morale, hinder recruitment, and contribute to broader challenges in building support for the workforce. Without a deliberate rebranding effort, the homelessness services sector risks losing future talent, particularly among newer generations like Gen Z.

UNDERUTILIZATION OF WORKERS WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

KPMG (2022) describes a lack of infrastructure to support people with lived experience (PWLE) in the workforce. Approximately 19% of staff in the sector report having lived experience with homelessness. However, few pathways exist for these workers to advance into mid-level or leadership roles. Barriers include degree requirements,

limited access to targeted mentorship, and the absence of compensated skill-building or training programs.

This underutilization reinforces workforce inequities and prevents the sector from fully leveraging the insights of lived experience.

SILOED RELATIONSHIP WITH BROADER WORKFORCE SYSTEMS

The homelessness response sector is largely disconnected from workforce boards, community college systems, and apprenticeship programs. This separation limits both resource access and systemic alignment. KPMG

(2022) and RAND (2023) both note that providers miss opportunities to leverage public funding, build multi-agency training systems, or track worker outcomes in concert with regional workforce strategies.

LACK OF WORKFORCE DATA INFRASTRUCTURE

Fewer than half of providers in the LA region track key workforce data, including turnover, promotion rates, or training outcomes (KPMG, 2022). This absence of data

infrastructure makes it nearly impossible to evaluate what workforce strategies are effective or to monitor equity in advancement and retention.

INSUFFICIENT SUPPORT FOR CLINICAL LICENSURE

For clinically trained staff, especially those pursuing LCSW or LMFT licensure, there are few pathways to advance within homelessness services while meeting licensure requirements. RAND (2023) reports that most providers lack structured clinical supervision programs, and staff are often unable to accrue supervision hours during paid work time.

This creates a talent drain among highly trained professionals who leave the sector in search of environments that better support their credentialing and professional development.



SMC'S HOMELESS SERVICE WORK CERTIFICATE PROGRAM



While many challenges facing Los Angeles County's homelessness services workforce are structural and system-wide, there are tangible ways to address the training needs of direct services workers who are both entering the sector and those who remain and progress in this important workforce. Institutions like Santa Monica College (SMC) play a vital role in addressing foundational workforce needs, particularly around skills development, structured entry, and the creation of credentialed pathways.

In 2024, SMC launched California's first Homeless Service Work Certificate Program at a community college. Funded through a partnership with the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), the program was created to train individuals for frontline roles in the homelessness response system. As the first program of its kind in

the state, it seeks to create a more comprehensive and structured approach to training those wishing to join the homeless services sector in Los Angeles. Since other training opportunities provided by the sector are often ad hoc and limited in their comprehensiveness, structure, and inclusiveness, SMC's Homeless Service Work Certificate Program serves as a model for a better and more comprehensive approach. Further, as nearly all training programs provided by the sector focus on existing staff, SMC's program is an important supplement for the development of the next generation of homeless services staff.

This section outlines how the program addresses specific gaps identified in the workforce landscape while realistically acknowledging its scope within the broader system.

“The Homeless Service Work Program began as a question: How can our college be a part of the solution to one of the most urgent challenges our country faces today?”

Dr. Nancy Greenstein,
Trustee, Santa Monica
College Board of Trustees

SANTA MONICA COLLEGE'S HOMELESS SERVICE WORK CERTIFICATE PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Target Audience

The program is designed for individuals interested in:

- Directly serving unhoused individuals through healthcare, housing, and case management
- Advocating for housing justice and navigating complex support systems
- Pursuing a career in nonprofit or public sector homeless services

Curriculum (12 Units Total)

- Fall Semester (6 units)
 - *Introduction to Workforce Training in the Homeless Response System (3 units)*: Covers housing policy, systems, and history of homelessness.
 - *Promoting Health Equity & Advocacy (3 units)*: Examines structural barriers and the roles of advocacy and equity in service delivery.
- Spring Semester (6 units)
 - *Implementing Effective Practices (3 units)*: Focuses on documentation, service navigation, and relationship-building with unhoused individuals.
 - *Capstone: Fieldwork Reflection & Career Planning (1 unit)*: Integrates coursework with real-world insight from sector professionals.
 - *Homeless Response System Work-Based Experience (2 units)*: Offers hands-on experience with frontline service providers.

Key Features

- Hands-on learning through work-based experience and expert guest speakers
- No prerequisites required
- Built-in student support (academic counseling, mentorship)
- Fully funded for the inaugural cohort via LAHSA partnership
- Classes are offered in person on SMC's main campus
- Career preparation for jobs in outreach, interim housing, prevention, permanent housing, and supportive services

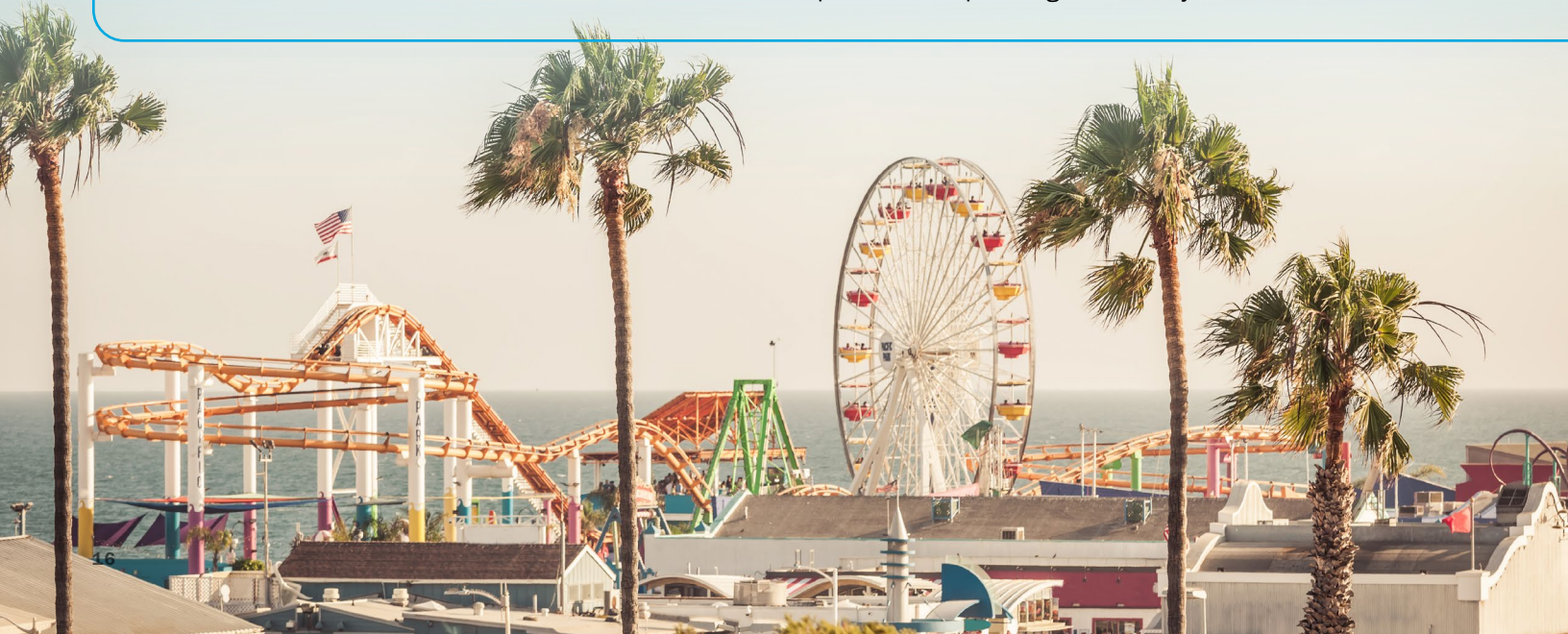
Career Pathways

Graduates are prepared for entry-level and mid-level roles in:

- Street outreach
- Interim and permanent supportive housing programs
- Housing navigation and case management
- Nonprofit and public sector service delivery

Admissions and Enrollment

The program currently operates under a cohort model, with students selected via an application and interview process led by SMC and LAHSA. Future cohorts are planned for upcoming academic years.



FOCUSING ENTRY INTO THE WORKFORCE

SMC's certificate program provides structured, job-specific training aimed at preparing students for their first employed role in homelessness services. The curriculum addresses common onboarding gaps by covering essential knowledge areas such as trauma-informed care, systems navigation, crisis de-escalation, and service coordination frameworks.

The program also builds students' awareness of the broader system they are entering—examining housing policy, equity frameworks, and historical trends—so that graduates can begin their roles with both technical knowledge and contextual understanding.

BUILDING FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

The certificate is built around the most in-demand competencies in the field such as trauma-informed care, de-escalation, and system navigation, as identified by employers. Through classroom instruction, guest lectures, and work-based experience, students gain practical skills alongside theoretical knowledge. By embedding these topics into the curriculum, SMC helps ensure that students are not only aware of key concepts, but are also able to apply them in service settings.

“Those conversations [in the SMC program] provided us with a framework to approach the issue with insight rather than assumptions.”

Homeless Service Work Certificate
Program Graduate

“It's not just learning, it's preparation for purpose-driven action.”

Homeless Service Work Certificate
Program Graduate

SUPPORTING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The program supports a broad range of learners—from students exploring their first career to those re-entering the workforce or shifting from informal service roles to formal employment. It is especially well-positioned for individuals:



Entering the sector for the first time



With lived experience of homelessness or related systems



Interested in transitioning into social work, housing navigation, or community advocacy

The program has already supported numerous students in launching or advancing their careers within the homelessness sector—leading to employment in a range of frontline roles, increased wages, and clearer trajectories for long-term professional growth.

The program also creates new opportunities for incumbent workers without formal degrees who are already active in the field but face advancement barriers due to the absence of recognized credentials.



CAREER ADVANCEMENT CAN OFFER VIABLE WAGES

To better understand compensation trends over time, the LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff asked respondents to report both their starting and current job titles and gross annual salaries. Among the 87 total survey respondents, 21 individuals reported a change in job title that, based on common sector norms, reflects a promotion or advancement into a higher-level role (e.g., supervisory or managerial positions).

For this subset of respondents:

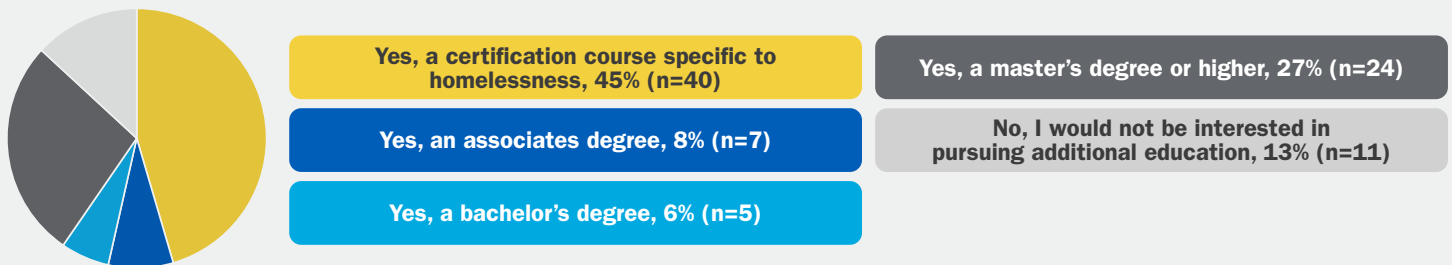
The average starting salary was \$41,933.

The average current salary was \$73,983.

This represents an average increase of \$32,050, illustrating the wage growth that can accompany career advancement in the homelessness sector.

These findings suggest that long-term, viable careers are possible for workers who advance into management or specialized roles. Training and credentialing—such as through SMC's Homeless Service Work Certificate—may support that upward trajectory by helping staff prepare for new responsibilities and signal readiness to employers.

FIGURE 8 *Interest in Pursuing Additional Education, LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff, 2025*



PROVIDING A SECTOR-RECOGNIZED ENTRY CREDENTIAL

Although frontline workers and their supervisors may currently prioritize time on the job as the primary driver for career advancement, this is likely due to the previous lack of credentialed programs in the sector. The LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff reflects a shift in sentiment: while tenure remains a leading advancement factor, 45% of respondents (n=40) indicated interest in a certificate program specific to homelessness services. At the same time, many respondents rated existing training as low-quality—signaling both unmet demand and opportunity for improvement.

SMC's Certificate addresses this gap by offering a formally recognized credential that:

- Demonstrates knowledge of key service frameworks
- Signals readiness for frontline roles
- Begins to establish more consistent hiring standards and expectations

Students and faculty alike report that the certificate adds structure and credibility—for both employers and learners. Many students already bring informal experience to the work, and the certificate validates that experience through practical instruction and job-aligned coursework. As employers begin to place greater value on formal training, programs like SMC's can serve as a foundation for both workforce entry and advancement.

STRATEGIC CONTRIBUTION

SMC's Homeless Service Work Certificate is not intended to resolve all of the sector's systemic workforce challenges including employer pay scales, promotion structures, or funding timelines. Within its scope, however, it has the promise to deliver a meaningful contribution to addressing workforce entry gaps by creating a structured, accessible training path that uplifts equity and lived experience through education.

As broader homeless system stakeholders begin to recognize and reward formal credentials, SMC's program can serve both as a critical talent pipeline and a compelling demonstration of how education institutions can drive workforce transformation and reinforce the value of frontline workers through targeted investment in their lifelong education.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES: SCALING THE MODEL

Santa Monica College's Homeless Services Work Certificate offers a targeted way to address early workforce gaps in the homelessness response system, especially around job preparation, training consistency, and accessible professional development. As other regions face similar challenges, there is growing opportunity to expand the program within SMC and adapt the model across community colleges throughout Los Angeles County and beyond.

Community colleges are well positioned to lead this work. With access to workforce funding streams, such as Perkins V and the Strong Workforce Program (SWP), and strong ties to local employers and communities, they are uniquely equipped to build and sustain training pathways aligned with regional labor needs. Their reach across the state creates a powerful opportunity to replicate and scale the model in ways that strengthen frontline capacity.

This section presents actionable strategies that community colleges can implement to expand the reach and deepen the impact of programs like SMC's Homeless Services Work Certificate across California.

“We envisioned something that wasn’t just a class or a certificate—but a pathway to purpose, a way to elevate and professionalize the essential work of supporting unhoused individuals.”

Dr. Patricia Ramos, SMC Dean,
Academic Affairs

The full educational ecosystem is key to building the workforce.

Strengthening the homelessness services workforce will require integrated efforts across the entire educational system—community colleges, CSUs, UCs, and other institutions. That means offering stackable, accessible pathways through credit and noncredit programs, certificates, associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees, as well as through varied learning modalities. Education must be a central pillar—not a side channel—of workforce development.



1 Share Program with Other Colleges

Developing a practical toolkit for peer institutions, which might include:

- Curriculum outlines and SMC's 12-unit course structure
- Sample syllabi, assignments, and guest speaker modules
- Guidance on establishing partnerships with local homelessness agencies and funders
- Recruitment strategies tailored to working adults, individuals with lived experience, and underrepresented students

Sharing these materials would make it easier for colleges to build on SMC's work and tailor the program to their own region's workforce needs.

2 Create a Faculty Community of Practice Among Community Colleges

Creating a statewide or regional learning cohort of community colleges implementing or exploring similar certificate programs. This could include:

- Quarterly calls with instructors, administrators, and field partners
- A shared knowledge hub for program materials, implementation guides, and student support resources
- Collaborative learning projects or outcomes tracking across colleges

3 Continue to Involve Employers to Keep Curriculum Relevant

Creating close partnerships between community colleges and local public and private homeless service providers to make sure the training reflects actual job needs. This can include:

- Asking employers for feedback on course content
- Embedding current practitioners as guest speakers or adjunct instructors
- Encouraging employers to include the certificate in job postings and job descriptions

SMC's existing partnerships with LAHSA and local service providers can serve as a template for new colleges entering this space.

4 Expand Access Through Flexible Formats

To reach more students—especially working adults and people with lived experience—community colleges can offer the certificate in flexible formats. Options include:

- Evening or weekend classes
- Hybrid or online courses for increased accessibility
- Cohort-style models for students referred by service providers
- Condensed formats designed for rapid onboarding of new frontline hires

Flexibility is key to ensuring the program meets students where they are.

5 Connect the Certificate to Longer-Term Pathways

To maximize career mobility, community colleges can formally align the certificate with other academic and workforce pathways. Strategies include:

- Mapping coursework to credit-bearing degree programs (e.g., social work, human services, psychology)
- Offering advising and clear articulation into associate or bachelor's degree options
- Partnering with nonprofit employers to integrate the certificate into hiring and advancement ladders

This approach strengthens the long-term return on investment for students and contributes to a more professionalized and sustainable workforce pipeline.

“Whether I go into social work, ministry, public health, law, education, or policy, understanding homelessness will help me to serve a broader range of people with both compassion and competence.”

Homeless Service Work Certificate
Program Graduate

CHANGES IN WORKFORCE PRACTICES

Community colleges like Santa Monica College can play a meaningful role in strengthening early training and workforce entry points. However, many of the deeper challenges the sector faces—low wages, unpredictable funding, and limited career pathways—fall outside the control of higher education institutions alone. Broader systemic and workplace culture change will be necessary to fully support the success of programs like SMC's Homeless Services Work Certificate.

This section identifies cross-cutting issues that affect the broader success of SMC's program and other community college-based workforce initiatives.

1 Inadequate and Inequitable Compensation

Findings from the LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff and external research confirm that frontline wages in Los Angeles County frequently fall below the self-sufficiency standard, making it difficult for workers to meet basic living expenses, particularly in a high-cost region. For students from low-income backgrounds, including those with lived experience of homelessness, this presents a significant barrier. Even after completing training programs, many may be unable to accept or sustain employment in the sector if compensation remains insufficient.

These wage limitations constrain the long-term viability of the workforce pipeline, especially for students juggling caregiving responsibilities, housing instability, or other financial pressures. Without livable wages, the promise of workforce development cannot translate into stable, lasting careers.

To address this, system-level transformation will require:

- Making position titles for the same work uniform across agencies and establishing living wage thresholds for these positions, ensuring equity among program types and agencies
- System administrators and funders to routinely monitor wage equity across their program portfolio
- Fully funding the true cost of service delivery, including competitive wages
- Incorporating cost-of-living adjustments into contracts and grants
- Establishing new, dedicated funding streams to support equitable and sustainable pay

2 Employer Culture Around Hiring and Advancement

Findings from the LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff showed that performance and personal networks continue to outweigh formal training or credentialing in how workers advance in the homelessness sector. This presents a key barrier to long-term student success; even well-trained, credentialed students may face limited opportunities for growth if employers do not recognize or prioritize workforce development.

Without shifts in hiring and HR practices—integrating certificates, using training history to inform advancement, etc.—students may not experience the full benefits of programs like SMC's, even if they are otherwise well-prepared.

3 Unstable and Short-Term Funding for Frontline Positions

Many homelessness service providers operate under year-to-year funding cycles tied to grants or pilot programs. These contracts often do not include resources for onboarding, staff development, or wage growth. As a result, even high-quality new hires face churn, limited supervision, and stalled progression, regardless of their qualifications.

This instability can directly affect students graduating from programs like SMC's. They may enter agencies without consistent onboarding, find few structured opportunities for growth, and quickly become discouraged or burnt out.

4 Limited Supervision and Support for Career Advancement

Many employers lack structured professional development or coaching programs. Even if students begin in well-matched roles, they may face stagnant job responsibilities, limited feedback, and unclear promotion paths. For students seeking clinical licenses or longer-term careers in the sector, the absence of supervision hours or tuition support further limits advancement.

This makes it difficult for certificate-holders to move from entry-level to mid-level roles, ultimately reducing retention and undermining the broader return on workforce training investment.

5

Strengthen Employer and Funder Buy-In to Sustain Long-Term Workforce Impact

Long-term success of programs like SMC's Homeless Services Work Certificate depends on employers and funders actively recognizing formal training and credentials in their hiring and advancement practices. Currently, career progression in the homelessness sector often relies more on tenure and informal networks than on structured training or demonstrated competencies. Findings from the LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff reflect that certificates and credentials remain secondary in advancement.

To shift this dynamic, employers must integrate credential recognition into job descriptions, onboarding practices, and promotion pathways. Doing so not only supports program graduates but also strengthens organizational capacity and retention. Similarly, funders can play a key role by incorporating workforce development expectations into contracts and grant criteria—encouraging providers to hire from formal pipelines and to invest in staff development over time.

Without deliberate buy-in, even high-quality training programs risk becoming disconnected from employment outcomes. Embedding credentials into standard hiring and funding practices is essential to ensuring workforce development efforts translate into durable sector improvements.

CONCLUSION

The homeless services sector continues to face widespread issues in recruitment, retention, and advancement, with frontline roles marked by low compensation, inconsistent training/ credentialing, high burnout, and limited opportunities for professional growth. In light of these challenges, community colleges can provide a valuable foundation for addressing early training and credentialing in the workforce pipeline.

Santa Monica College's Homeless Services Work Certificate prepares students with the baseline knowledge and skills needed for entry into the homelessness services sector. The program offers a clear and accessible entry point, especially for individuals who may not have followed traditional academic pathways or who bring lived experience to the work.

As the needs and gaps identified are not unique to Los Angeles, community colleges across California can adopt and adapt SMC's approach, strengthening training consistency and increasing access to workforce development opportunities. The strategies outlined in this report, such as aligning with employer needs, offering flexible formats, and supporting student progression, can enhance the existing model.

Despite these strategies, expanding training/credentialing access alone will not be enough. Student and program success ultimately depend on broader systems being equipped to recognize, retain, and support workers long-term. As the homelessness sector continues to evolve, including the launch of the County's new Department of Homeless Services and Housing, closer alignment between education providers, workforce systems, and homeless service employers will be essential.

SMC's Homeless Services Work Certificate represents a focused step in building a stronger, more accessible workforce pipeline. Sustained cross-sector collaboration will determine whether workforce investments lead to broader system improvements.

“Together, we are shaping a more humane and just future—one student, one worker, and one life at a time.”

Dr. Steven Sedky, SMC Associate Dean, Career Education (Interim)

APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

This report draws on a combination of primary data collection, labor market research, and recent sector analyses to assess workforce challenges and the role of community college programming in supporting the homelessness response system.

1. Primary Data Collection: LDC Survey of Frontline and Supervisory Staff

Santa Monica College partnered with LeSar Development Consultants to design and administer a targeted, exploratory survey of individuals currently working in Los Angeles County's homelessness response system. The survey was distributed in Spring 2025 and sought to capture the experiences and perspectives of two key groups: frontline staff and supervisors of frontline staff.

The survey covered a range of topics, including:

- Entry pathways and initial wages
- Quality and content of initial training
- On-the-job skill development and supervision
- Career advancement experiences and perceived barriers
- Views on the value of credentials and professional development opportunities

Survey responses were used to inform relevant sections of this report by surfacing illustrative themes and directional insights. While the findings provide useful context, they are not generalizable and should be interpreted alongside other quantitative and qualitative data sources.



Please scan the QR code to access the survey questions.

Limitations:

- The survey used a non-randomized, convenience-based distribution approach. Respondents opted in voluntarily and were more likely to reflect individuals with interest or capacity to respond during the survey period.
- Outreach workers were overrepresented in the response pool, potentially skewing results and limiting visibility into the experiences of other subsectors.
- The timing of the survey overlapped with significant external disruptions. The instrument was disseminated on May 27, 2025, and remained open through June 18, 2025. On June 6, 2025, a wave of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in Los Angeles triggered protests and widespread mobilization among service providers. These events likely constrained participation from many programs.
- Multiple outreach efforts were made to sector leaders to encourage broad distribution; however, response rates varied across roles and organizations. The survey should therefore be understood as a non-representative snapshot rather than a comprehensive assessment of workforce sentiment.

2. Labor Market and Job Posting Analysis

In addition to the survey, this report incorporates publicly available labor market information, including:

- Data from Lightcast (2025) on advertised salaries, job posting volume and intensity, and required education and experience levels for social service-related occupations relevant to the homelessness response sector in Los Angeles County

3. Sector Research and Comparative Reports

This report also draws from a set of recent national and regional studies that examine homeless services workforce challenges. These include:

- KPMG (2022 & 2024): Sector-wide workforce assessments of hiring, retention, and training practices across LA County
- RAND Corporation (2023): Analysis of frontline worker safety, job satisfaction, and retention
- McKinsey & Company (2023): Structural challenges and funding patterns in homelessness response systems
- NAEH (2023): Working in homeless services: a survey of the field
- NAEH (2024): Working with unsheltered people: findings from the Alliance's workforce survey

These materials were used to triangulate findings from the LDC survey, corroborate sector-wide trends, and ensure that report conclusions are grounded in established research.

APPENDIX 2: WORKS CITED

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APPENDIX 3:

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

This glossary provides definitions for key terms used throughout the report to support readers who may be unfamiliar with the homelessness response system or workforce development field.

HOMELESSNESS SYSTEM TERMS

- **Point in Time (PIT) Count:** An annual count, required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), that estimates the number of people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January. It includes both sheltered and unsheltered individuals.
- **Coordinated Entry System (CES):** A standardized process used by homeless service providers to assess individuals and families, prioritize those with the highest needs, and connect them to housing and services in a fair and organized way.
- **Housing First:** An approach to addressing homelessness that prioritizes providing immediate, permanent housing to individuals experiencing homelessness without requiring participation in other services (e.g., substance use treatment, mental health treatment).
- **Unsheltered Homelessness:** Refers to people living in places not meant for human habitation, such as sidewalks, parks, vehicles, abandoned buildings, or encampments.
- **Supportive Services:** Help provided to individuals experiencing or exiting homelessness to maintain housing stability. Services may include case management, mental health care, substance use treatment, life skills training, or employment assistance.
- **Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH):** Long-term, affordable housing paired with supportive services for people who have disabilities and have experienced long-term or repeated homelessness.
- **Rapid Rehousing (RRH):** A program that helps people quickly exit homelessness by offering short- to medium-term rental assistance and supportive services, like help finding housing and case management.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT & EDUCATION TERMS

- **Frontline Workers:** Staff who directly interact with and support people experiencing homelessness. This includes roles like outreach workers, case managers, housing navigators, and peer specialists.

- **Lived Experience (of Homelessness):** Refers to people who have personally experienced homelessness or housing instability. Their insight is increasingly recognized as essential in designing and delivering effective services.
- **Credentialing:** The process of earning a certificate, license, or degree that formally shows a person has specific skills, education, or training needed for a job.
- **Career Pathways:** A clear series of steps—including education, training, and work experience—that help a person enter, stay in, and advance in a career.

TRAUMA-INFORMED AND MENTAL HEALTH TERMS

- **Trauma-Informed Care:** An approach to working with people that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma and prioritizes safety, trust, and empowerment to avoid re-traumatization.
- **Vicarious Trauma (Secondary Trauma):** The emotional impact of hearing about or witnessing others' traumatic experiences, which can lead to stress or burnout for service providers over time.
- **Burnout:** A state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress at work—especially common in helping professions like social services.

WORKFORCE SYSTEM TERMS

- **Living Wage:** The income needed for a worker to meet basic needs—such as housing, food, and transportation—in their local area, without relying on public assistance.
- **Stackable Credentials:** Certificates or other qualifications that build on each other, helping individuals advance in their education or career by gaining more skills and recognition over time.
- **Work-Based Experience:** Hands-on learning that happens in a real job setting, often as part of a training program. It helps students gain practical skills while being supported by a teacher or mentor.

