



## ***Operating a Domestic Abuse Program: A Fair Minimum Why We Need a Fair Minimum***

Domestic abuse staff come to work each day to help victims who face danger—and even death—from their partners. Without staff to help maneuver difficult systems and create safety plans, many more people would die.

This is not a job that everyone can do, let alone do well. Dealing in life and death is incredibly stressful and often lead to secondary trauma. Without the most qualified staff, victims are not provided with the services they need and deserve; the agency, community, and domestic abuse movement cannot make progress toward a society free from interpersonal violence.

In 2019, the Budget Committee of the Governor's Council on Domestic Abuse updated and released "Operating a Domestic Abuse Program: A Fair Minimum" to help Wisconsin domestic abuse agencies identify a reasonable and fair staffing pattern for core services and fair compensation for those doing the work. The document highlighted for some agencies the stark difference between starting wages for their staff and competitive wages for similar position in competing industries throughout the state.

### **The Implementation of "A Fair Minimum" Ensures:**

#### ***★ Quality Services for Domestic Abuse Victims***

Experience with numerous complex cases over time gives staff a better context to provide high-quality support and care for survivors in support groups or through other services. It takes a new employee one to two years to reach the productivity and knowledge of an experienced staff member.

Advocates and staff work in complex situations that are constantly changing. **Only experience and time can equip staff with the resources and resilience they need to make challenging judgment calls without additional support.**

A Fair Minimum leads to improved safety for victims. Agency staff, working within complex systems, bring multi-layered community knowledge and resources to their work. Without this knowledge, resources, tools and set of skills, many victims of domestic abuse would not find safety.

#### ***★ Retention of Qualified/Experienced Staff***

Without competitive wages and benefits, as staff gain some experience, they leave for other opportunities with better compensation. There is an actual monetary cost of turnover, including: hiring, training, higher error rates and the negative effect on agency culture. That is a hefty price tag—

financially, emotionally and programmatically. In terms of dollars, this ranges from 1.5-2.0 times the employee's salary.<sup>1</sup>

The effects are not just monetary. When there is turnover, clients suffer because staff who have knowledge of a client's story and the systems within their community are no longer available to advocate for them. As a result, clients are staying in abusive situations longer, extending stays in shelters, having less success in legal matters, and/or experiencing new barriers in their lives.

### ★ *Fair Compensation for Staff*

Skilled staff should be compensated for their expertise, professional skills, and commitment. Unfortunately, Wisconsin ranks in **the bottom quarter of states nationwide for domestic abuse salaries**<sup>2</sup>. Often staff do not have health insurance or are unable to meet their families' basic needs due to insufficient income.

The domestic abuse movement has long supported social justice for all; economic justice and equity comes a reduction in domestic abuse. It is meaningless to strive toward economic justice when staff struggle to meet their own basic needs. Equity for all must be supported to fulfill the mission to end domestic abuse.

### ★ *Continued Community Trust and Support*

Within all communities, nonprofits work hard to maintain a positive public reputation. To do this work requires trust, not only between the client and staff, but the staff and the community. Building trust takes time. It takes years for new staff to build that kind of trust. The stronger the relationships are between staff and the community, the stronger the agency's reputation. If there is constant turnover, that reputation is challenged and potentially deteriorates.

Lack of community support translates to low-quality outcomes for survivors in the following ways:

- Fewer financial contributions
- Less understanding and awareness of the dynamics of interpersonal violence
- Less cooperation between systems and professionals who encounter interpersonal violence cases

## **Conclusions Regarding the Implementation of "A Fair Minimum":**

The provision of fair compensation for qualified and experienced staff ensures quality services for domestic abuse victims, continued community trust and support, and a society free from interpersonal violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Josh Bersin, "Employee Retention Now a Big Issue: Why the Tide has Turned," <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20130816200159-131079-employee-retention-now-a-big-issue-why-the-tide-has-turned>.

<sup>2</sup> ZipRecruiter, "Domestic Violence Advocate Salary in Cedarburg, WI," <https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Salaries/How-Much-Does-a-domestic-violence-advocate-Make-a-Year-in-Cedarburg,WI>.