

Economic Justice and Domestic Violence ADVISORY COUNCIL

Recommendations: Advocate Compensation
April 2023



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Advisory Council is made possible by:*



History

Most of us identify the 1970s as a time of economic struggle and cultural change. For the domestic violence movement, it meant rallies, Take Back the Night marches, and the first National Women’s Conference in 1977. For many, the 1970s marked the first time they felt part of an actual movement; the first time like-minded women, dedicated to a single mission, gathered to create a unified voice. It was this momentum that created the groundswell for the passage of the Family Violence Prevention Fund in 1980 and the Violence Against Women Act in 1994, along with countless other accomplishments in between. However, the movement is not without deserved critique and disappointment, as it was largely lead publicly by white women, often leaving out or disregarding the voices and experiences of Women of Color.

Prior to the first domestic violence shelters, women often sought refuge in other women’s homes. Even after the emergence of actual shelters, these were largely operated on shoestring budgets and supported by donations and volunteers. Additionally, working in the domestic violence field has long been seen as “women’s work,” which has never truly been valued or seen as equitable to “real work,” therefore leading to a perpetual cycle of under-compensation and a general lack of respect. Women have historically held jobs in the human services field or jobs requiring emotional labor (the practice of managing feeling and emotions)—particularly when the position does not require a master’s degree or higher level of education—and therefore this work continues to be undervalued by the larger society.

Another contributing factor to historically low wages in this field is the specific work itself. Society often engages both overtly and covertly in victim-blaming. Viewing victims and survivors as somehow responsible for their own “victimhood” allows others to devalue not only the victim, but their helpers as well. A direct comparison between a domestic violence advocate working in a private nonprofit, and a child welfare worker employed by a local or state government, highlights these differences:

Average Salary:
Domestic Violence Advocate¹ **\$32,717**

Average Salary:
Child Welfare Specialist² **\$50,377**

¹ “Domestic Violence Advocate Salary,” ZipRecruiter (2022).

² “Child Welfare Specialist Salary,” Zippia (2022).

Reality

This is difficult work, which often requires navigating complex issues, necessitating a broad skill set and an understanding of community resources; yet, many frontline advocates (those working directly with survivors at local programs) do not make enough money to support themselves and a family. It is common for them to report holding a second or third job in order to make ends meet. Currently, the average advocate pay (as of October 2022) is \$32,717 per year (\$15.73 per hour), with a range of \$29,000-\$36,500 per year.¹

- ★ According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC), the national “housing wage” (the wage needed to afford housing) is \$53,705 per year (\$25.82 per hour) for a modest two-bedroom rental, or \$44,200 per year (\$21.25 per hour) for a modest one-bedroom rental.³
- ★ Furthermore, many frontline advocates qualify for the same public benefits they are helping survivors access, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Affordable Care Act (ACA) health insurance. However, there can be a tremendous amount of shame associated with accessing those services, especially given advocates’ position.
- ★ It is important to recognize that many frontline advocates not only experience financial insecurity but also may identify as survivors of domestic violence. One Texas study of 530 intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual assault professionals found that 58% of participants reported experiencing trauma as a child, and 50% reported experiencing trauma as an adult.⁴ Therefore, investing in staff salaries and professional development aligns with overall goals of supporting survivors with economic empowerment.

In addition, the practice of using past salaries to set current wages perpetuates the gender pay gap; it assumes that prior salaries were fairly established by previous employers. Relying on salary history allows a new employer to continue underpaying a woman who faced a pay gap and lost wages due to bias or discrimination at a previous job. Employers should not use salary history to set wages; they should use set salary bands, pegged to the duties of the job. If a woman starts her career with a pay gap that might be tainted by prior discrimination or working in a lower-paying field, it’s likely to follow her from job to job, perpetuating the wage gap.⁵

Finally, occupational segregation is a contributing factor to lower wages and a major factor behind the pay gap. Women and men tend to work in different kinds of jobs. Women are disproportionately represented in education, office and administrative support, and health care occupations. Women of Color are particularly segregated to lower-paying fields. Men are disproportionately represented in construction, maintenance and repair, and production and transportation occupations, which generally pay more. Even though a pay gap exists within

³ “[Out of Reach: The High Cost of Housing](#),” National Low Income Housing Coalition (2023).

⁴ Wood, Leila, *et al.* “[Technical Report: VOICE: Victim Services Occupation, Information, and Compensation Experiences Survey](#),” The Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault at the Steve Hicks School of Social Work, at the University of Texas at Austin (2019).

⁵ Vagins, Deborah J. “[AAUW Statement for House Education and Labor Subcommittees Hearing on the Paycheck Fairness Act](#),” American Association of University Women (2019).

nearly every occupational field, jobs traditionally associated with men tend to pay better than traditionally female-dominated jobs that require the same level of skill.⁶ The work that women do is valued less than work done by men, including in (for example) the domestic violence field.

Diversity and Inclusion (D&I)

Recently, the term “diversity and inclusion” has become a common phrase used in many workplaces. It is the result of employers and companies beginning to understand that more needs to be done to include and advance employees of color.

The domestic violence movement has its own work to be done in this area. Positions of power and higher pay are often held by white women, who often have the ability to stay in the movement longer and work their way up, given their increased access to generational wealth made possible due to institutional racism. Lack of diversity and racial equity has long been a deserved criticism of this movement. Increasing pay, especially for frontline staff, and improving benefits are two steps in addressing this glaring disadvantage and inequity. Paying an actual living wage will provide space and support for Women of Color to thrive within the movement.

Additionally, bilingual advocates are not only underpaid but are often expected to act as translators for others, in addition to doing their own jobs.

Microaggressions often impact advocates’ real, true access to high positions and advancement within the organization. Microaggressions are significantly associated with secondary traumatic stress, which is sometimes called an occupational version of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and is associated with negative health outcomes and employee turnover.⁷

In the aforementioned Texas study, 30.7% of participants reported witnessing or experiencing a race- or ethnicity-based microaggression at work, and 15.3% reported witnessing or experiencing a sexual orientation-related micro-aggression at work.⁴

“Ensure the economic wellbeing of all staff by eliminating racial disparities and committing to intentional practices and long-term changes. Historically, Black workers have been forced to work in underpaid and undervalued positions. In domestic violence services program, the frontline staff are usually People of Color who earn low wages and have few benefits, if any at all. Leadership must center equity in their hiring and human resources practices and actively dismantle ‘how it’s always been done.’ This may mean offering a higher salary for equity reasons, as opposed to relying on salary history to determine an initial offer.” – *Recommendation from Experiences of Advocates of Color Working in the Field of Domestic Violence and Strategies for Change*⁸

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Voth Schrag, Rachel J., et al. “Compassion Fatigue Among the Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Assault Workforce: Enhancing Organizational Practice,” *Violence Against Women* (2021).

⁸ Palmer, Jane E. and Lucane LaFortune. “Experiences of Advocates of Color Working in the Field of Domestic Violence and Strategies for Change,” *Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence* (2022).

Turnover and Occupational Stress

Advocates of color report experiencing additional emotional burnout and field departure due to microaggressions.⁸

Turnover intention (a reported willingness to leave a job within a given period of time) is significantly associated with race and ethnicity. In another Texas survey, Black advocates reported higher turnover intention. Additionally, turnover and lack of retention leads not only to survivors reporting frustration with the services they receive, but they are also related to lower salaries and lower satisfaction with supervisory situations.⁹ Programs also tend to be slow to rehire and fill positions in large part because the pay is so low; this again results in services suffering and remaining staff being overworked while filling the gap.

One of the biggest challenges from the field is keeping staff; improving compensation is a strong step toward addressing staff attrition. Losing staff not only influences the short-term by affecting the obvious (like a potential gap or strain in services) but, as a movement, we also lose institutional knowledge and shared history. Advocates who stay in the movement long-term often do so because they are highly “mission attached” and have accepted lower wages to stay in the movement.

Advocates can and do leave this field to make more money elsewhere. They are often adept at problem-solving and crisis intervention and show flexibility, making them very appealing to other employers who are able to pay them closer to a living wage.

Secondary and vicarious trauma are real issues and challenges to keeping good staff on board; coupled with poor pay, subpar benefits, and heavy workloads, employment on the frontline tends to be a revolving door.

Healing and support must be standardized within employment; only when staff are paid living wages, coupled with generous benefits and leave options, is that possible. Communication, organizational transparency, and safe work environments are also critical factors to job satisfaction.

Many advocates are survivors themselves; we cannot say we value the lives and well-being of survivors when the field that likely hires the most survivors does not pay a living wage.

⁹ Wood, Leila, *et al.* “[Turnover Intention and Job Satisfaction Among the Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Assault Workforce](#),” *Violence and Victims* (2019).

What Local Programs, Boards of Directors, and Communities Need to Know

- ★ **Advocates are at the table with other community members who are making significantly more than they are, often in jobs with full benefits, including retirement and pensions.** (For example, law enforcement officers make, on average, \$67,600 per year.)¹⁰ Often times, advocates are not offered full-time jobs, but rather shift or part-time positions, leaving them without access to better pay and benefits that might be offered to full-time employees.
- ★ **Advocates often feel that there are no clear pathways for growth within local programs and communities.** Many have held the same position for years without promotions or, when promoted, the responsibilities may increase while the financial benefits are still limited. Local programs must establish clear pathways for advocates to grow and become leaders in this field and ensure that compensation is equitable and matches experience and growth.
- ★ **Growth within local programs is often one direction towards management, versus valuing and rewarding employees' current work.** This means that advocates can often only make more money if they work towards an internal promotion. As a result, many frontline advocates tend to be very new and novice.
- ★ **Advocates are often doing multiple jobs at once, yet their titles and pay scales do not always reflect the levels of responsibility they hold.** It is important for local programs to review their job listings and positions to determine if they are accurate and to remain committed to establishing clear boundaries on what is expected so that advocates do not feel burnt-out or taken advantage of.
- ★ **Understanding that many advocates identify as survivors themselves, organizations should explore whether their current human resource policies truly support their staff who may be currently experiencing abuse.** Policies may include: reporting practices, mental and psychiatric health support, paid protective leave and emergency leave, and workplace stalking intervention and prevention strategies.
- ★ **Some organizations gatekeep advocates' status as survivors.** However, trauma from the same organization often ends up impacting employee satisfaction, and trauma-informed supervision is needed. Recent trauma is more indicative of burnout and turnover than being a survivor of IPV years prior.⁷
- ★ **Overtime, flextime, and paid leave policies should be available and as flexible as possible to encourage self-care and advance staff retention efforts.**

¹⁰ DePietro, Andrew. "[Here's How Much Money Police Officers Earn in Every State](#)," Forbes (2020).

What State Administrators and Legislators Need to Know

- ★ **Some states and territories allow coalition and local program employees to participate in certain state and territorial benefits.** Employees need benefits beyond the basic; these should include things like childcare support, transportation and gas reimbursement, counseling and psychiatric care, education and tuition reimbursement, executive and career coaching, paid family and medical leave, and financial and estate planning support.
- ★ **There are challenges with restrictive funding.** State administrators and legislators need to change their mindset from “enough” to “thriving.”
- ★ **Some state and territorial coalitions and legislation groups can operate as gatekeepers to innovative solutions, grants, and legislation opportunities that help build advocates’ capacity.** It is important for state administrators and legislators to determine how to ensure information and resources trickle down effectively to the local programs and communities they are serving, especially, smaller People of Color-led organizations and initiatives.
- ★ **State administrators and legislators should continue to earmark funding and resource allocation for culturally specific and systematically oppressed groups.**

What Federal Policymakers and Foundations Need to Know

- ★ **The Office on Violence Against Women has stated that “survivor economic justice” is a priority and many advocates are also survivors.** We cannot claim to want survivor economic justice and yet allow one of the largest employers of survivors to pay a less-than-living wage.
- ★ **Federal policymakers and foundations must promote survivor leadership by insisting on a living wage so they can stay in the field to gain experience.**
- ★ **Foundations should consider trust-based funding.**
 - Larger and more established organizations tend to get the most benefit with requests for proposals (RFPs) and grant solicitation opportunities. However, there are amazing survivor-led grassroots initiatives that are left out because they do not operate with the same capital. These grassroots organizations are forced to compromise their integrity or goals to secure fiscal sponsorship by larger organizations. It is important for policymakers and foundations to actively seek out these grassroots organizations and determine how to better support them in accessing resources.

- Foundations tend to fund direct service work. While this is important, many organizations can benefit from additional funding for administrative, organizational capacity building, and general operations. We encourage foundations to explore how they can develop multi-year RFPs and funding opportunities for this area so organizations can obtain the resources they need to address advocate compensation, benefits, and turnover.
- ★ **Requiring sustainability plans for nonprofit organizations does not make sense.** It implies that someday the program could be self-sustaining, which is not possible in this field.
- ★ **Congress should take up and pass legislation that addresses equal pay, use of prior salary history, and occupational segregation.**

What Now?

- ★ **Every domestic violence program and service provider should work towards insisting on nothing less than a living wage for all employees.** NLIHC provides an annual living wage assessment for nearly every state, territory, county, and city called Out Of Reach. Every employee should be able to expect at least a living wage.
- ★ **State, territorial, federal, and private foundation funders should insist that every grantee pay a living a wage and be willing to support a living wage with use of their funds.**
- ★ **Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I) statements must include markers for improvement, which should incorporate salary and racial assessments.**

Resources for Further Reading

- ★ [Building Longevity in Our Movement: 2022 Statewide Family Violence Program Compensation Report](#) (Texas Council on Family Violence)
- ★ [National Census of Victim Service Providers](#) (United States Bureau of Justice Statistics)

About the Economic Justice and Domestic Violence Advisory Council

Background:

The National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) Economic Justice and Domestic Violence Advisory Council is a long-term, in-depth collaboration of national experts in the domestic violence field working to advance survivors' economic empowerment and financial well-being. NNEDV virtually gathered those working at the intersection of domestic violence and economic justice to identify gaps and strategize ways to expand awareness and solutions through recommendations. It was our intention members would coalesce around a set of mutual goals and principles identified by the Council. Ultimately, the Council aims to inform public policy advocacy and program design, in addition to highlighting resource gaps and emerging issues.

Member Organizations:

- ★ [Asian Pacific Institute on Gender Based Violence \(API-GBV\)](#)
- ★ [Center for Survivor Agency & Justice \(CSAJ\)](#)
- ★ [Esperanza United](#)
- ★ [FreeFrom](#)
- ★ [Futures Without Violence \(FUTURES\)](#)
- ★ [Institute for Women's Policy Research \(IWPR\)](#)
- ★ [Just Solutions](#)
- ★ [National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life \(NCALL\)](#)
- ★ [National Coalition Against Domestic Violence \(NCADV\)](#)
- ★ [National Resource Center on Domestic Violence \(NRCDV\)](#)
- ★ [Ujima: The National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community](#)
- ★ [YWCA USA](#)

Host:

- ★ [National Network to End Domestic Violence \(NNEDV\)](#)

Advisor:

- ★ Leila Wood, PhD MSSW, University of Texas Medical Branch