



Building a Sustainable Workforce Through Wages and Wellness

Housing First Partners Conference

April 2024



A brief history of DESC in Seattle

- DESC began in 1979 as an initiative out of the Seattle Mayor's office, in collaboration with community members who were concerned by the rate of homelessness among people with significant mental health challenges.
- Since then, DESC has always challenged itself to be an essential community partner, growing to meet the needs of Seattle's most vulnerable adults, living homeless.
- Today DESC owns and operates over 1,500 units of Permanent Supportive Housing and hundreds of emergency housing shelter beds. We are also a licensed community behavioral health provider, offering behavioral health outreach services, outpatient services, and crisis response services for all of King County, featuring many positions filled by individuals with lived experience.
- Today, DESC has over 1,000 authorized positions, spanning throughout King County and an annual operating budget of \$120M. We serve approximately 8,000 individuals each year.





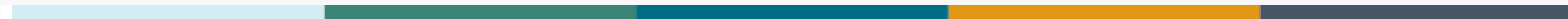
Today's Presenters

Noah Fay,
Senior Director of Housing

Heather McDuff,
Project Coordinator

Mateo Chavez,
Community Engagement Coordinator

Lauren Fay,
Senior Business Manager



Goals for today's discussion

Think of employee wellness as holistic- it needs to encompass **financial wellbeing** of employees as well as **personalized self-care** to continue being able to do this work long-term.

Discuss tangible ideas for instituting or enhancing workplace wage goals.

Discuss tangible ideas for instituting or enhancing workplace wellness goals.

Share meaningful messages and resources you can use in your own local advocacy.




The challenging world we were living in

Internal

- Morale lows
- Turnover highs
- Wage lows

External

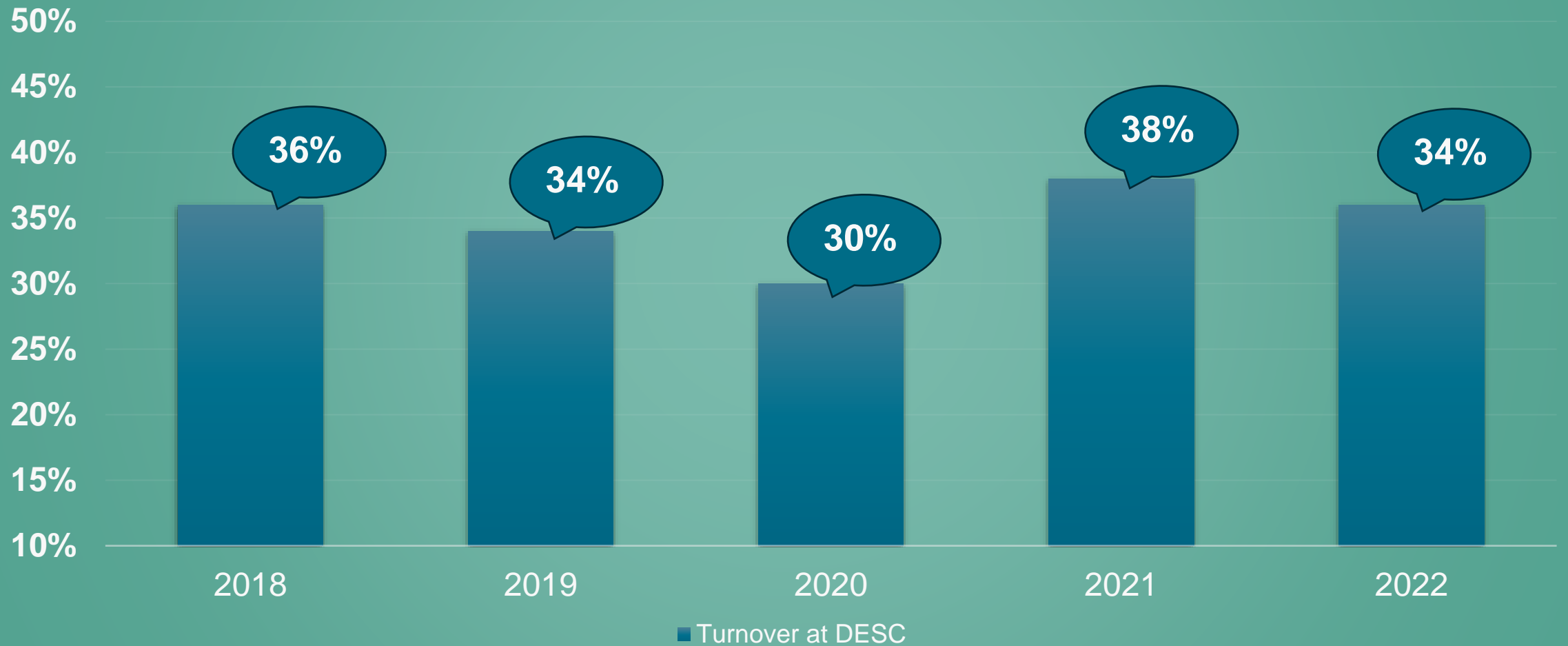
- Pandemic stressors
 - Social injustices
 - Toxic, unregulated drug supply (fentanyl)
 - Cost of living increases
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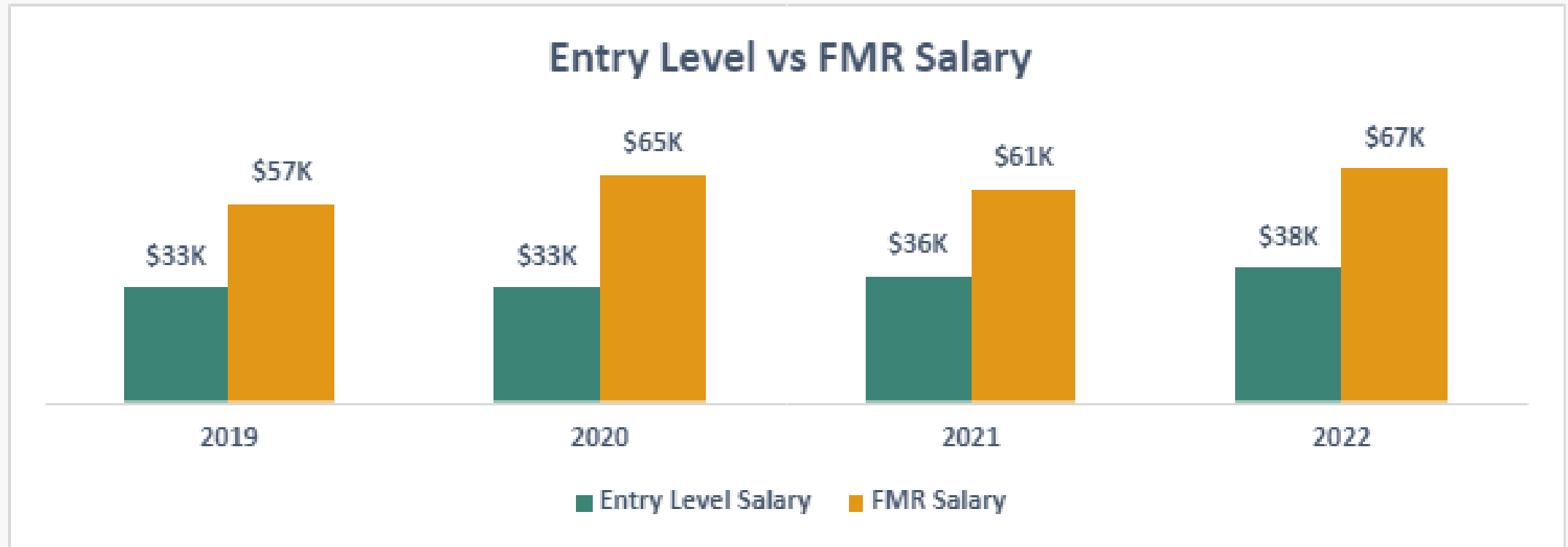
A quick story on morale

After the last Housing First Partner's Conference in Seattle, DESC held our first in-person all staff meeting since the pandemic, and we tried to talk about wellness.

Annual Turnover at DESC Before & During COVID



Not keeping up with local cost of living



FMR= Fair Market Rent, as defined by HUD



We were not alone.

The COVID-19 Pandemic combined with the ongoing and intensifying opioid epidemic led to an exodus in staff in our profession at DESC, but also in the field generally speaking..

Stories of workers leaving these helping professions for good became common.



This is what we did
about it.



Wellness Related Actions

- Formal & informal information gathering, workgroup formation and networking
- Hard conversations with leadership, amplified after all staff meeting
- Turning the ideas into next steps, finding champions
- Dedicating resources to this cause officially
- Set a clear goal:

We see a future where all staff at DESC find the support to prioritize their own self-care and continue to show up with grace and patience to serve our most vulnerable population





Wage Related Actions

Set a clear goal to work towards:

All workers earn a dignified wage that affords them the ability to live in an apartment, in the city they serve, without rent burden.

Note: Currently in Seattle that would be a salary of \$88,440 a year



We were strong in our message



- Our **workers are skilled and essential professionals** and should be compensated as such.
- **Service workers should be able to make a career out of the work** and not be forced into administrative roles or out of the field altogether to earn a living.
- We **cannot solve homelessness if our workforce is also at risk** and competing for the same affordable units that are created for the people we serve.
- **People who work to serve the community should be able to** at least **afford**, without rent burden, a **studio/efficiency apartment** in the community they serve.
- **We work to build and operate affordable housing**—not to cause even more people to need it.
- **Fair market rent (FMR)** is the best tool at our disposal to set goals in real time for **wages that will allow workers to live in/near the community they serve**.

Strategies that have helped us get closer to our wage & wellness goals

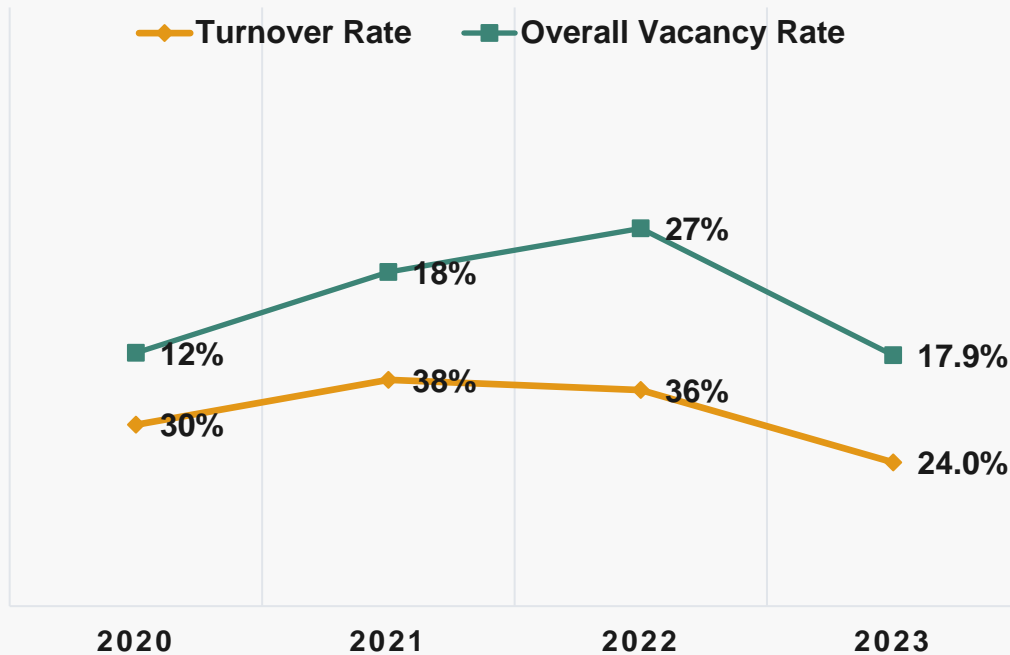


- Joint advocacy with our labor union (SEIU 1199NW)
- Investing in Diversity, Equity & Inclusion work, including hiring an external consulting team to conduct a comprehensive Equity Assessment of the organization, with a focus on employee wellness
- Policy advocacy that has resulted in routine inflation adjustments to contracts (ex. [Seattle City Council requires Human Services Department to include inflation adjustments in contracts](#))
- Strong support for progressive tax structures locally (ex. [Seattle Jumpstart](#) spending plan, and [Payroll Expense Tax](#) description) that go towards ending homelessness.
- Portfolio style contracting
- State-wide advocacy for [Operating, Maintenance & Services](#) dollars for Permanent Supportive Housing
- Coalition building among partner organizations

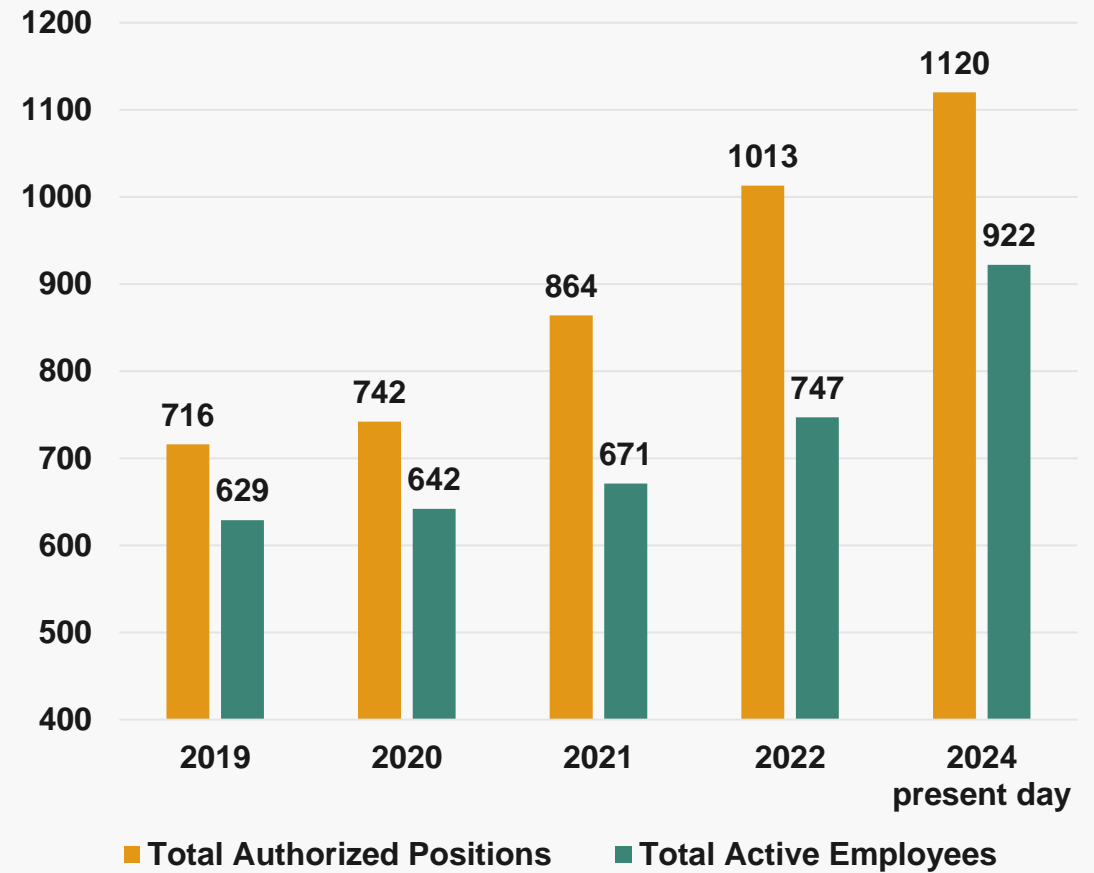
Results and Outcomes So Far



EARLY INDICATORS OF SUCCESS



Growth at DESC Since 2019

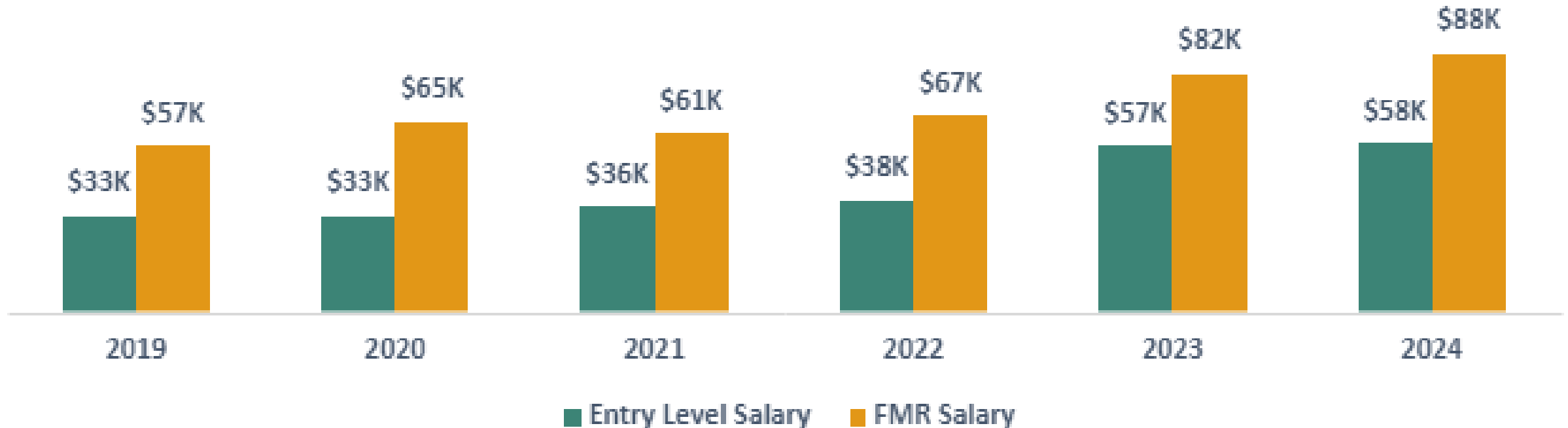


Progress towards achieving our wage goals

We just achieved a new wage floor at DESC of \$29.58/hr. This is more than 48% increase since 1/1/2022.



Entry Level vs FMR Salary



Wellness Supports Now Available



The Employee Wellness Workgroup:



- Senior HR Engagement & Wellness position was created after Mateo met with Senior managers to share out information gathered in the initial EWP. Group meets monthly.
- Our goal is to increase equity in accessing health and wellness resources across the agency by providing this information to staff in their preferred language.
- Working on identifying and creating safe spaces at all sites for staff to use.
- Sub workgroups within the wellness workgroup that focus on identifying burnout within yourself and your staff as well as PTO management and how to maximize your benefit by pre-planning respite.
- Finding ways to engage underrepresented staff across the agency and encourage more input and involvement from them and all front-line staff.



Self-care training:

- DESC has incorporated self-care into our New Employee Orientation, Heather and Mateo still lead the training every month.
 - We discuss the increase in fentanyl overdoses/deaths and the many other factors that can affect our overall well-being. We share strategies that we ourselves use as well as strategies that are available from the agency and our health care provider.
 - We also encourage staff to get involved, citing our own ability to lay the groundwork for this much-needed and well received addition to DESC.
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Next Steps

- Increase wellness inclusivity for all staff
- Incorporate wellness check-ins to supervision model for managers
- Don't lose ground on the progress we've made

Let's chat!

**What are you
experiencing in
your community?**

**What do you want
to talk about?**



HOUSING AND HEALTH
TO END HOMELESSNESS