

Title: Understanding Social and Mental Health Needs of Hospital Workers Earning Low Wages

Background: Employees who earn low wages comprise one-third of U.S workers, are essential to many industries, and experience multiple health inequities compared to higher-wage workers.

Objective: To understand low-wage hospital workers' social and mental health needs, barriers and facilitators of participation in workplace health programs, and recommendations for workplace psychosocial supports.

Methods: The study recruited hospital service workers and supervisors in two low-wage departments (Environmental Services, Food/Nutrition Services) in a Southern California health system in 2023. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted and analyzed by two independent raters using Dedoose 9.0.107 software and structured thematic analysis.

Results: Participants were service workers (n = 43) and supervisors (n = 6) aged 21-65; 75% (n=37) were female and 79% (n=39) reported Hispanic/Latinx ethnicity. Workers reported multiple social needs that impacted their work productivity, stress, and health, including food insecurity, financial stress, sleep difficulties, social isolation/lack of social support, and discrimination. Workers also reported mental health symptoms including depression, anxiety, and chronic stress. Supervisors reported awareness of both social and mental health needs among their staff and expressed a desire for additional support services. Barriers to accessing existing workplace supports (e.g., employee assistance programming) included lack of awareness, burdensome work schedules (e.g., multiple jobs), and other responsibilities (e.g., caregiving). Facilitators included confidence in the privacy/confidentiality of services and flexibility in service modality and schedule. Workers' and supervisors' recommendations for additional workplace supports included childcare and transportation subsidies, food vouchers, physical activity classes, and confidential psychosocial support (e.g., counseling).

Conclusion: Hospital service workers reported having social and mental health needs that affected their work performance, stress, and health. Workplace programs such as accessible psychosocial support, childcare and transportation subsidies, and community resources to address social needs may improve work performance and quality of life for low-wage workers.