



**VOICES FROM  
THE FRONTLINE**

**NAVIGATING  
UNCERTAIN  
WATERS:  
NYC WORKFORCE  
PROFESSIONALS  
IN THE AGE OF  
COVID-19**

**NOVEMBER 2021**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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The 2021 Survey follows in the wake of WPTI's 2020 Survey of Frontline Workforce Professionals and the series of reports developed from its findings. Stacy Woodruff, WPTI Senior Fellow, led research efforts in connection with the 2020 Survey of Frontline Workforce Professionals and crafted the initial reports for the initiative, with support from research consultants Matthew Vanaman and Scott Koenig, as well as Justin Collins and Gregory Brodie of WPTI. The 2020 Survey of NYC Workforce Professionals was designed in partnership with the CUNY Labor Market Information Service (LMIS), who also provided extensive data analysis.



WPTI wishes to express gratitude to the dozens of frontline workforce professionals, leaders, and intermediary partners from across the New York City workforce ecosystem who participated in focus groups and stakeholder interviews, broadly disseminated the 2020 and 2021 Surveys of NYC Frontline Workforce Development Professionals, and provided valuable feedback to realign initiative priorities in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. These individuals provided informed, candid, and often heartfelt assessments of the roles assumed by frontline workforce professionals; the challenges encountered within workforce organizations and embedded into the fabric of the workforce system; and the importance of the often passion-driven work of frontline workforce professionals in their efforts to position more New Yorkers for success in the labor market.

Additionally, we thank the more than 200 frontline workforce professionals who participated in the 2021 Survey of Frontline Workforce Development Professionals; without their input, the Voices from the Frontline initiative would not be possible. Finally, we are grateful for the support of the full WPTI team for working every day to provide support, increase capacity, and raise the standards of quality service throughout New York City's workforce development field.

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## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: ESSENTIAL FOR ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND EQUITY



those workers  
earning less than  
\$40,000 annually  
were 18 percent  
more likely to  
have lost their  
job while workers  
earning more than  
\$100,000 were 34  
percent less likely to  
have been laid off  
or furloughed.

The Covid pandemic had devastating effects on New York City's economy, as the city saw unprecedented job loss. Low-income workers were hit especially hard by the more than a million jobs that were lost in the opening months of the pandemic. As restaurants, hotels, and retail stores closed, workers of color were disproportionately displaced. In the initial months of Covid, with a surge in disease and widespread lockdowns, New York City saw a twenty percent decline in employment, a much steeper and more severe job loss than the 13 percent decline in employment the US overall experienced. Though the city has seen a substantial jobs rebound over the course of the past year, job growth has slowed and NYC's employment level is still down 10 percent compared to pre-Covid, more than three and a half times that of the job deficit nationwide. Workers who were lower income, persons of color, younger, and less well-educated were disproportionately affected. Compared to the average dislocated NYC worker, those workers earning less than \$40,000 annually were 18 percent more likely to have lost their job while workers earning more than \$100,000 were 34 percent less likely to have been laid off or furloughed.<sup>2</sup>

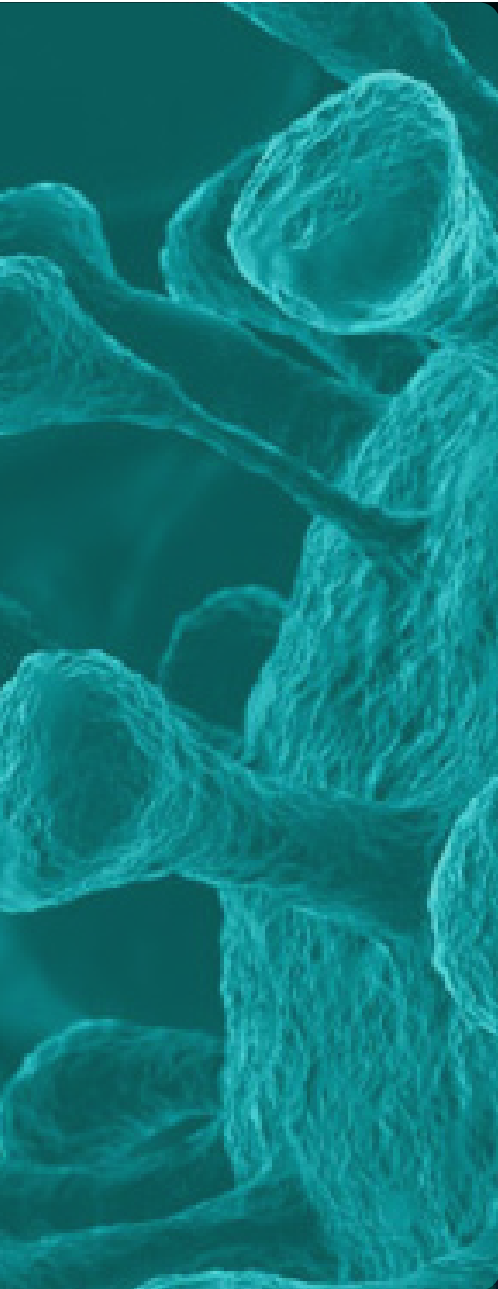
These low-income workers most likely to have been impacted by the Covid-19 economic and health crises are precisely those workers whom frontline staff serve. These low-wage workers often represent marginalized communities, such as formerly-incarcerated people, immigrants and refugees, currently or formerly homeless individuals, or individuals without a high school diploma. These challenges may have served as barriers to entering the labor market in the first place, causing their employment status to be more tenuous and/or necessitating their interaction with workforce development or other human services agencies. These workforce development providers, generally offering career training, job placement and retention, and other supportive services to unemployed and underemployed workers, and represent a critical piece of a broader "workforce development system" - that also includes government, the philanthropic community, employers, organized labor, and other critical stakeholders that ensure workers have access to job opportunities and, ultimately, economic opportunity.



Even as the city continues to navigate the ongoing health crisis and looks toward recovery, New York will see a wave of workers who need to be re-skilled, upskilled, and ultimately reconnected to jobs in a changed economy, in addition to those who have been historically excluded from the labor market even in strong economic times. These job seekers will enter a dramatically changed workforce, with many small businesses having shuttered during the past year and the uptake of digital tools meaning permanent changes to most sectors of the labor market. Young adults just entering the workforce, as well as workers who face outsized barriers to employment, could see persistent challenges to securing work and/or progressing on career pathways with potential for economic advancement. After a year of economic and public health turmoil, many of these workers will need training and educational programs to find work that provides them with better pay and greater opportunity. These challenges and many others mean that the workforce development system will be crucial for helping New Yorkers get back to safe, stable, and fairly paid jobs. The workers who make up this crucial field will therefore be “essential workers” of the next phase of the city’s economic recovery, working closely, on the front lines, with individual job seekers looking to emerge from unemployment or underemployment. The conditions of their work, from compensation and job quality to morale and equity considerations, are important to understand as we rely on this workforce to help others find secure, family-sustaining employment and advance in their careers.

This report, the sixth in the Voices from the Frontline series, traces the impact of this unprecedented health and economic crisis on front line workers in the in the workforce development field. We present new findings that showcase unique challenges, including the difficulties of placing job seekers when many entry level positions evaporated during early pandemic lockdowns while remaining opportunities sometimes carried greater health risks, and challenges meeting required recruitment, placement, and retention goals and outcomes in a more challenging labor market. This report follows on a recent investigation co-authored by WPTI and the Center for New York City Affairs of Covid-era digital transformation, during which the rate at which workers had to learn new digital tools and develop new norms to work, collaborate, and reach clients from their homes accelerated and placed new stresses on both workers and frontline organizations.





This new report highlights how Covid-era disruptions must be considered alongside longstanding challenges that frontline workforce professionals have faced, including the ways in which low pay, financial insecurity, and limited organizational resources constrain workforce operations, hurt morale, and potentially drive talent from the field, threatening the ability of workforce programs to succeed at a moment when the sector's role at helping other New Yorkers return to work is most crucial to the economic recovery. But despite these constraints, frontline workers report believing in the purpose of their work, trusting their colleagues, and feeling supported by their peers and managers. Frontline workers tend to be mission-driven, engaged, and motivated to help New Yorkers find stable and fulfilling work. They value the ability to exercise autonomy and creative decision-making to find the best solutions for their clients. Though frontline workers are often required to juggle multiple responsibilities, they are also resilient problem-solvers. Overall, despite real challenges around compensation and limited resources, frontline workers still express high levels of satisfaction with their jobs. This report examines how these essential and resilient workers can be better supported and compensated as they take on the crucial work of putting New Yorkers back to work.

It is worth noting that many of the challenges explored in this report are not, ultimately, challenges brought about by Covid-19. The similarities in results from the 2021 Survey of Frontline Workforce Professionals and its January-February 2020 counterpart (conducted just prior to Covid-19), reveal that many of these challenges existed prior to the pandemic, even if the pandemic did exacerbate stressors and disproportionately impact already-marginalized communities, such as low-income New Yorkers and New Yorkers of color. At their core, many of the challenges illustrated here are structural challenges that run deeper than the pandemic, and need to be tackled in a systemic, structural manner for New York City's workforce system to better meet the needs of both the communities it serves, and the professionals providing these services.

## INTRODUCTION

# SURVEYING THE FRONTLINE WORKFORCE AFTER THE ONSET OF COVID-19



Continuing the series of Voices reports that investigated pay, equity, and job quality through a survey of pre-pandemic frontline workers, this report explores these topics in the wake of the pandemic and resulting economic crisis.

An online survey conducted between March and May 2021 received over two hundred responses from these workers. Most survey respondents work directly with job seekers and training program participants (87 percent), meaning these are the workers who directly interact with New Yorkers seeking to find a job, complete their high school equivalency or other adult basic education, or gain skills and/or certifications that will allow them to find a better job or advance in their current job.

Nearly all respondents were employed by non-profit organizations (93 percent) and a majority work for large organizations with 100 or more employees (63 percent). While most organizations focused on workforce development services (79 percent), over 1 in 5 respondents also provided housing support, family counseling, or legal services (21 percent), suggesting that many respondents understand the role of “workforce organizations to be capacious, including services beyond connecting workers to jobs.



# 95%

said they were familiar with their organization's overall purpose and reported it is very important to them.



# Frontline Workforce Development Worker Demographics and Experience

Survey respondents tended to be women (65 percent), workers of color (76 percent), and highly educated (70 percent held a bachelors or post-graduate degree). Both men and women respondents were highly educated, with 72 percent of male respondents and 70 percent of women holding at least bachelor’s or graduate degree. Many of the demographic features of the 2021 survey respondents were similar to those from 2020, allowing us to compare survey results and track the effects of Covid-19 on this workforce.

(See Appendix I for the survey methodology and comparative demographics from 2020 and 2021 surveys.) Frontline workers are overwhelmingly well-informed and motivated by the missions of their organizations (95 percent said they were familiar with their organization’s overall purpose and reported it is very important to them).

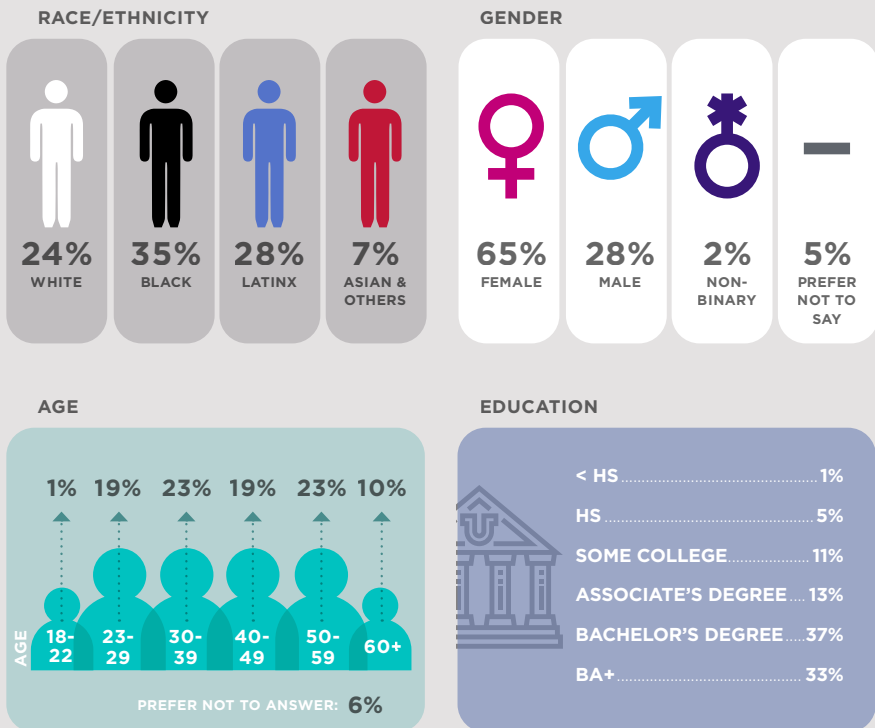
Finally, nearly a quarter of respondents had been a clients of a workforce development organization in the past. The rate at which employees who identify as men or women were formerly a client of the same organization at which they work was nearly identical (26 percent of male employees and 27 percent of women).

## SURVEY RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS AND ORGANIZATION TYPES

The overwhelming majority of respondents (86 percent) reported working directly with jobseekers and program participants. More than nine in 10 respondents worked for a non-profit organization (two percent worked for a university, three percent for the for-profit private sector, and three percent for a government agency). More than six in 10 worked for an organization employing 100 or more workers.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents identified as women and more than a third identified as Black (Figure 1). Workers from

Figure 1.  
**FRONTLINE WORKFORCE SURVEY RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS**



Though the survey demographics remained similar between the 2020 and 2021 surveys, the more recent set of responses, collected after the onset of Covid, revealed a few important differences. In particular, the change in the reported length of job tenure may reflect the momentous disruptions of the past year, including a pause in new hiring and fewer workers changing jobs. Compared to prior to Covid, half the percentage of respondents had worked for their current employer for less than a year. Additionally, a higher percentage had been with their current employer for 3 or more years (63 percent in 2021 compared to 46 percent in 2020). New hires were therefore less represented among survey respondents as indeed organizations may also have seen a slow-down in new hires. See Figure 2.

Figure 2.

## CHANGE IN JOB TENURE

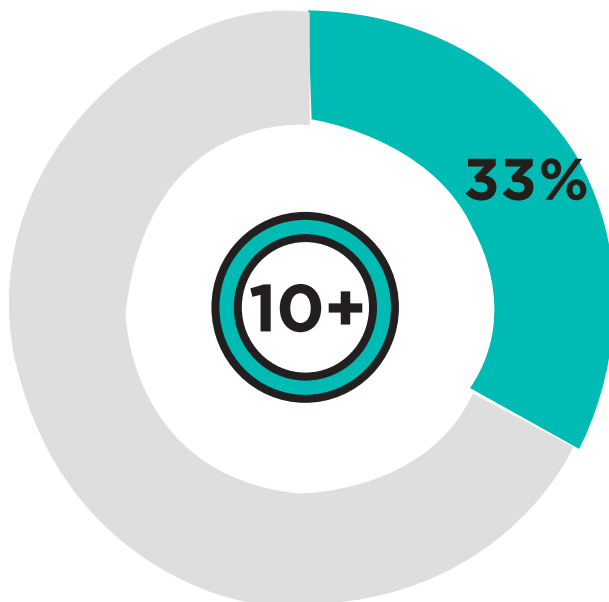
Length of time with current employer	Survey Year	
	2021	2020
Less than 1 year	14%	28%
1-2 years	22%	26%
3-5 years	26%	23%
6 years +	37%	23%



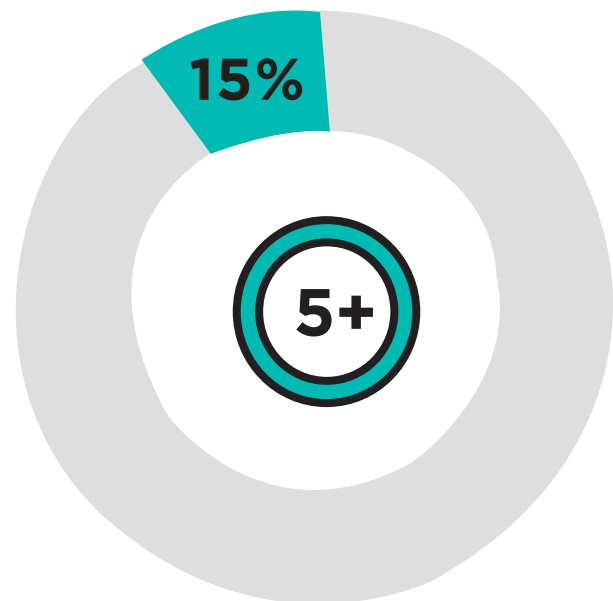
Source: CNYCA-WPTI Survey, Mar.-May 2021.

Longer work tenures allow workers to have experience under numerous different economic and political conditions. Because many survey respondents had been in the workforce development field for years prior to the pandemic, they are able to offer years of experience in assessing their jobs and the field under different economic conditions (33 percent of respondents had more than ten years' experience in workforce development, while an additional 15 percent had more than 5 years' experience). More than 60% of respondents had been in the workforce development field for at least 2 years prior to the onset of Covid-19, allowing them to compare aspects of work expectations and norms that changed during the pandemic (63% of respondents had 3+ years' experience as of 2021).

And yet, nearly 36 percent of respondents had 2 years or less of experience in the workforce field, suggesting that the work experience of these respondents has largely been shaped by the pandemic period. While newer workers made up a smaller portion of frontline workforce respondents than previous Voices reports documented-- a shift that may reflect less hiring during Covid-- these workers also represent a portion of each organization's employees that may need special support as the sector transitions out of Covid-era policies and toward returning to the office, maintaining work from home arrangements, or a hybrid of both. [WPTI's Digital Transformation Report](#) (September, 2021) explored some of the new needs and support structures that sector will have to address as the economy recovers, including tailoring training to the digital tools that are most needed for specific job titles, but also offering additional support for developing producing communication practices among employees whose working lives have never included time in a shared office.



**33% had more than 10 years' experience in workforce development**



**15% had more than 5 years experience in workforce development**

Figure 3.

## FRONTLINE WORKERS REPORTED SERVING:



## Workforce Development frontline workers serve those hardest hit by pandemic job losses.

Survey participants worked with a variety of clients, from unemployed, working-age adults to those New Yorkers who faced obstacles to employment even prior to Covid-19. Over half of frontline workforce respondents reported serving public-assistance respondents, and just under half work with housing insecure populations, justice-involved individuals, English language learners, and those with mental health or substance abuse issues.

Well over half of the respondents reported that their organizations served youth (16-24) who were impacted by interruptions in schooling as well as reduced opportunities for those least experienced entering the workforce. The role of workforce development in helping these young workers jumpstart their careers, and enter the workforce in a high-quality job with advancement prospects will be crucial for making sure there is not a generational Covid impact.



## WORKER COMPENSATION, JOB QUALITY, AND FINANCIAL SECURITY



Median annual salary for frontline survey responders was \$45,000-\$55,000 per year.

Employment and pay practices in the workforce development sector generally offer workers full-time employment, on-time pay, and regular hours, but also provide low levels of compensation that create stress, uncertainty, and poor conditions for long-term financial strength for many workers. The overwhelming number of respondents were full-time employees (96 percent), with the remaining 4 percent including part-time, seasonal, and temporary workers. 98 percent of all respondents said they were consistently paid on time.

Respondents overall indicated a continuity in their work schedules and hours worked from prior to the pandemic (82 percent of workers had the same schedule as prior to Covid), though work practices and norms have dramatically changed with the accelerated uptake of digital tools and work-from-home practices (see the Digital Transformation Report). However, nearly 1 in 10 respondents reported working additional hours (9 percent) and another 6 percent reported irregular shifts in schedules and hours worked. Additionally, 12 percent said they were regularly expected to work overtime.

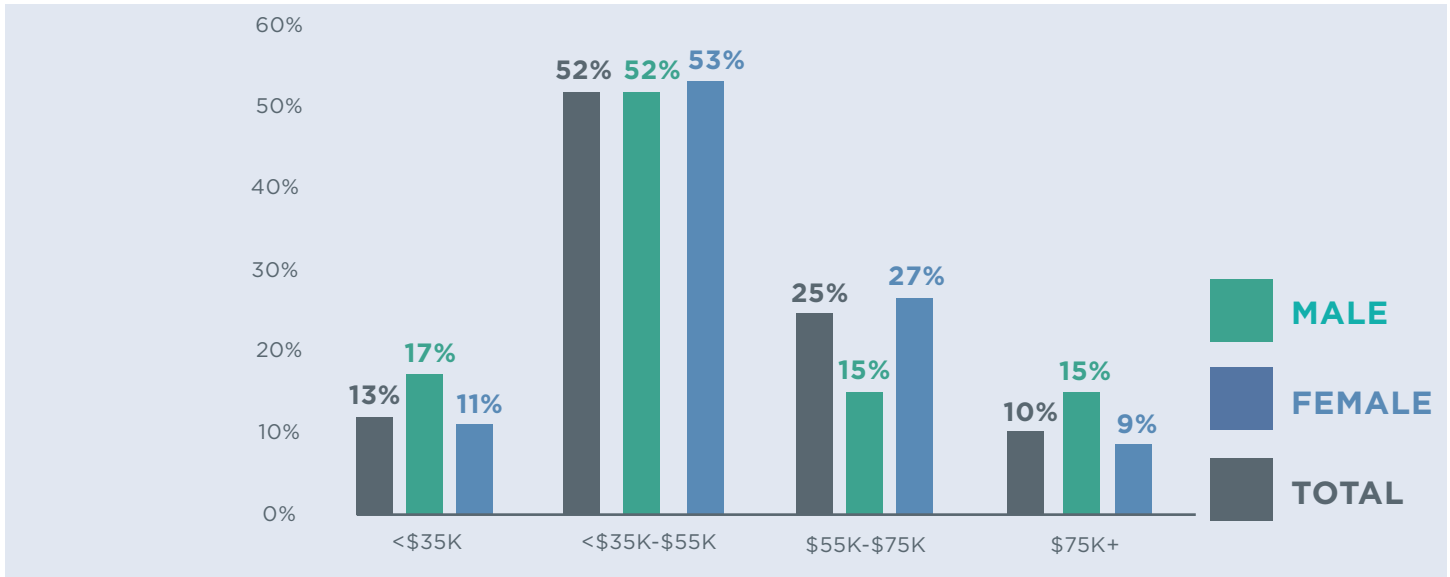
Median annual salary for frontline survey responders was \$45,000-\$55,000 per year. Nearly half of survey respondents earned between \$35,000 and \$55,000 annually. While workers who identified as men and women had similar median salaries, respondents in the highest income bracket (more than \$75,000 annually) and those in the lowest income bracket (less than \$35,000) were more likely to be men. Because male and female respondents held similar education levels and reported similar rates of being former clients of the organizations at which they work (see above), gendered compensation rates deserve closer attention.



Figure 4.

## SURVEY RESPONDENTS' CURRENT ANNUAL SALARY

(prior to taxes and deductions)



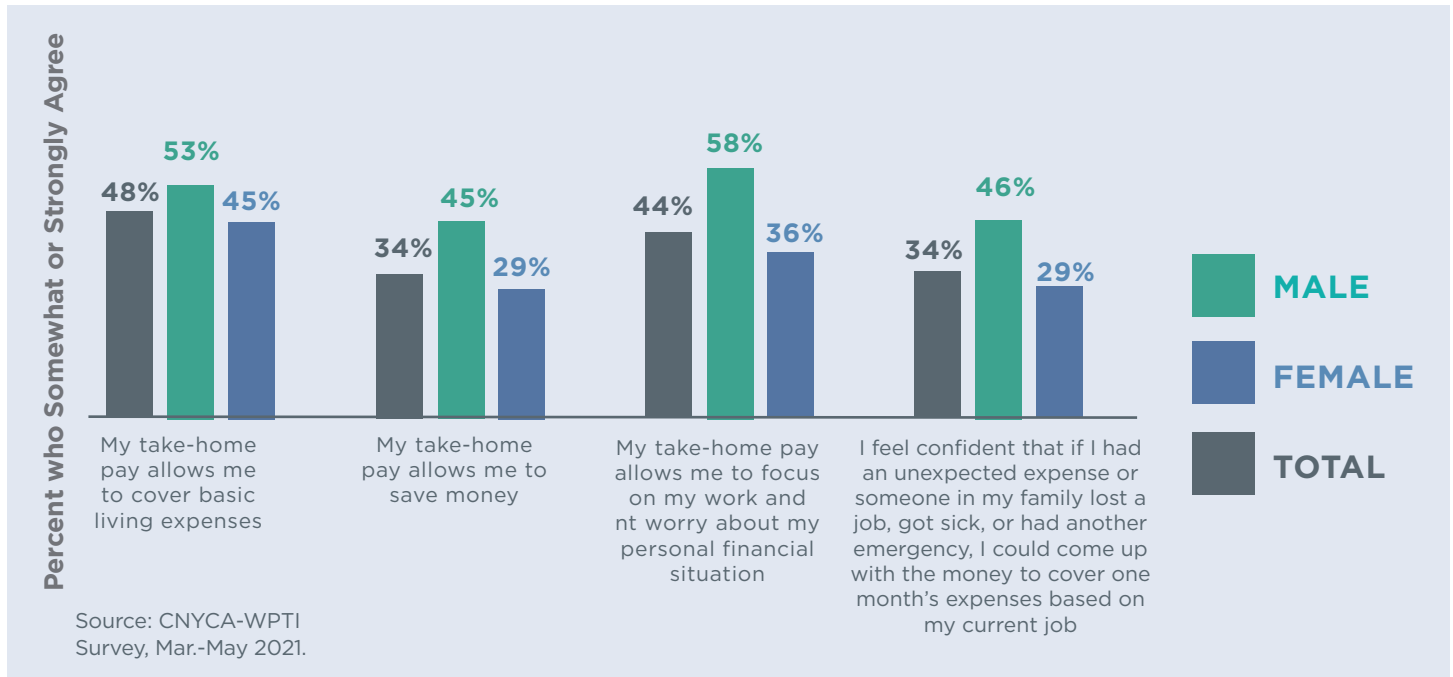
Source: CNYCA-WPTI  
 Survey, Mar.-May 2021.

Less than half of frontline workers agreed that their take-home earnings were sufficient to cover basic living expenses (48 percent) and only a third of workers felt their take home pay allowed them to save money (34 percent) and more than half said worries about their financial situation sometimes interrupted their focus on work (56 percent).

Gender gaps were consistently visible across questions of financial security. Only 29 percent of women felt that they earned enough to allow them to save, compared to 45 percent of their male colleagues. Additionally, only 29 percent of women felt they would be able to cover an unexpected financial expense, compared to 44 percent of all respondents, and 58 percent of men. Crucially for both workforce organizations and for the clients and businesses that rely on them, more than half of all respondents said that financial worries kept them from focusing on their work and nearly two thirds of women workers said that low pay was a barrier to focused work.

Figure 5.

## FRONTLINE WORKERS’ LOW-PAY PRODUCES FINANCIAL ANXIETY AND REFLECTS GENDER INEQUITY



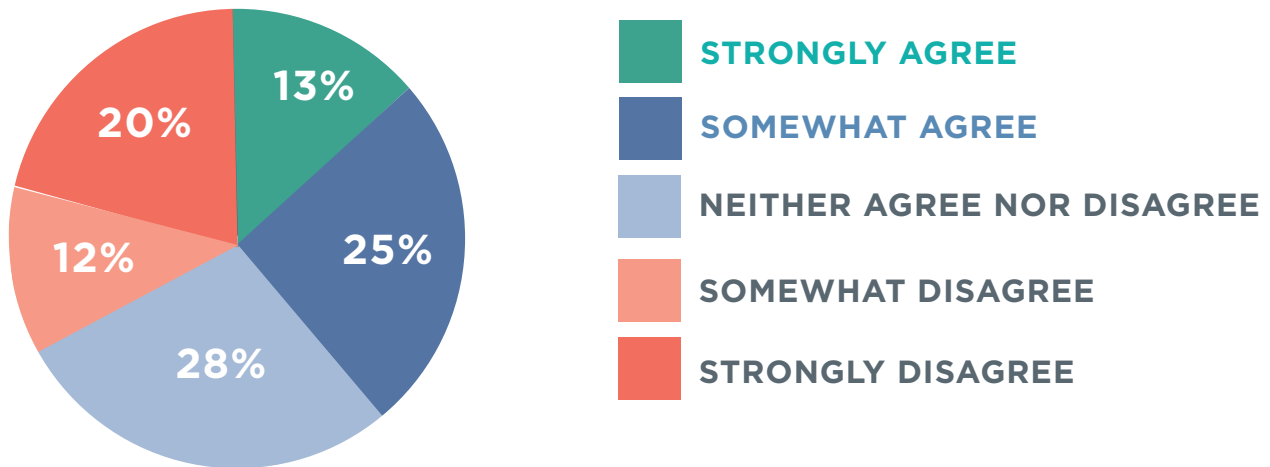
During a year when many workers and their families faced unexpected economic changes—family members lost jobs, children learning from home required caregiving—only 34 percent of respondents felt confident that if they had an unexpected expense or someone in their family lost a job, got sick, or had another emergency, they could come up with the money to cover one month’s expenses. Sixteen percent of respondents said they had more than one job, with more than half of those workers doing so to earn additional money (63 percent).

The stresses of low pay can be compounded by uncertainty about job permanence and whether workers are able to exercise their right to use paid time off. Only just over half of respondents strongly agreed that their employer encouraged them to take their paid vacation time (56 percent). Furthermore, while only 1 in 5 respondents strongly disagreed that they worried about being laid off in the coming year, nearly double that number either agreed or strongly agreed that they worried about being laid off by their current employer (39 percent). See Figure 5. While of all respondents, only 13 percent said they were very concerned about if they could be laid off within the next year, when only considering workers with 2 years tenure or less, that number increased to 18 percent.

Figure 6.

## FEELINGS OF JOB INSECURITY

I worry I could be laid off by my current employer within the next year.



This anxiety regarding job security correlates with a few major developments that have impacted workforce development and human services providers in New York City. First, financial pressures faced by New York City's nonprofit sector in the wake of Covid-19, as organizations furloughed staff, dipped into cash reserves, and in some cases even closed their doors. The Center for an Urban Future's April 2021 report, *New York's Safety Net In Jeopardy*, examines the potential "financial catastrophe" facing numerous organizations, many of which had risen to the challenge of providing critical services throughout the pandemic. This echoes other reports from 2020 and 2021 of nonprofit layoffs around the city and across the country. Many workforce development professionals likely fear that financial challenges could potentially lead to their departure, regardless of their performance.

Second, since the arrival of the pandemic, much focus has been placed on meeting low-income New Yorkers' most immediate needs - food, housing, healthcare (including mental health services) - sometimes at the expense of workforce programming. This includes private funders shifting their grantmaking portfolio away from workforce development and into meeting these basic needs. Third, throughout the pandemic, workforce providers have faced challenges meeting contract and grant requirements regarding placements and retention, resulting in concerns about losing funding due to underperformance. This is a result of two key factors: namely a shrinking base of available jobs due to the economic downturn, and fewer clients seeking job placement due to childcare needs, the fact that Covid relief dollars paid more than many entry-level jobs, and fear of exposure to Covid. Altogether, these factors created a deeply stressful environment in which workforce professionals experienced feelings of job insecurity.



## Parents in the Workplace

Frontline workers with children tend to do the majority of caregiving and learning oversight for their children themselves. Just over a quarter of survey respondents have school-age children, of which the large majority were learning either fully remotely (56 percent) or hybrid remote and in person (35 percent) at the time of the survey. Among respondents who are parents, 45 percent said they had to oversee their children's learning themselves, with 12 percent relying on a spouse or partner, and 9 percent relying on a grandparent, friend, neighbor, sibling, or babysitter. The remaining nearly third said their children were on their own in their virtual learning (33 percent).

Overall, employers were supportive of parents. While half of frontline workers said their child's learning situation conflicted with their work this past year (51 percent), more than half of workers also said their manager had been very supportive and flexible in allowing them to adapt their work schedules to fit childcare demands. An additional third of respondents said their manager had been moderately supportive. While overall, respondents reported a variety of supportiveness, just over 1 in 10 respondents said their boss had offered no support or flexibility in helping their employees meet competing childcare and work demands.

Because a majority of respondents and of frontline workforce professionals are women and the gendered nature of how home labor is often distributed, it is especially important to consider the stressors placed on women responsible for children during the pandemic. Men and women reported similar rates of having at least moderately supportive supervisors (46 percent). But while 60 percent of respondents said when their children are not in school, they provide most of the childcare themselves, this percentage increased to 70 percent when only considering respondents identifying as female.

The unique stresses of remote learning will likely recede in the coming year, but the experience of parenting during the pandemic suggests that frontline workers with children would benefit from more explicit and flexible work policies.



**45% of  
parent  
respondents  
had to oversee  
their children's  
learning  
themselves and  
33% said their  
children were on  
their own.**



## EXPERIENCE OF FRONTLINE WORKERS DURING COVID



The past eighteen months have seen frontline workers navigating unprecedented territory, acclimating to remote work, seeking to place clients in an upended job market, and trying to meet the placement goals that their organizations and funders had set. The challenges presented by Covid for both frontline workers and their organizations cannot be overstated. At the same time, the survey revealed that many frontline workers are both from and were serving clients from zip codes that were particularly hard hit by the pandemic. Survey respondents emphasized that health fears and economic challenges affected their personal lives even as they sought to continue to meet their professional obligations.



More than 70% of respondents said they felt increased pressure to meet outcome metrics during Covid.

More than 70 percent of respondents said they felt increased pressure to meet outcome metrics during Covid. Lost funding, difficulties recruiting students and clients, meeting placement goals in a labor market in crisis, as well as updating and delivering curricula for remote instruction all posed difficulties.

New staff reported it was more difficult to receive the training they needed. Both new and experienced staff underscored that it was difficult to place job-seekers as Covid disrupted the job market and opportunities for workers disappeared.

And yet, some frontline workers also appreciated the measures their organizations took to assist workers in adapting to the Covid situation. Many workers reported that outcomes expectations were modified to reflect the difficulty of placing clients. One respondent emphasized “I was allowed to work remotely. Trust and productivity go hand in hand.” Another respondent said she was glad her employer set her up with a laptop and printer at home (see DTI report for more details on the digital transformation accelerated by Covid).

**Covid made some jobs, like grocery store jobs and some healthcare positions more plentiful. But these jobs also came with added risks. Of those respondents who placed individuals in jobs, 20 percent said they had been asked to place clients in jobs they considered unsafe due to Covid-19.**

One respondent elaborated that “the structure of workforce funding and our national lack of a social safety net requires that we rapidly place candidates in immediate employment. Job developers, career counselors, and low-income job seekers as a result don’t have the luxury to be selective in their job search and job quality, resulting in limited options including unsafe jobs in retail, delivery, and warehousing.”



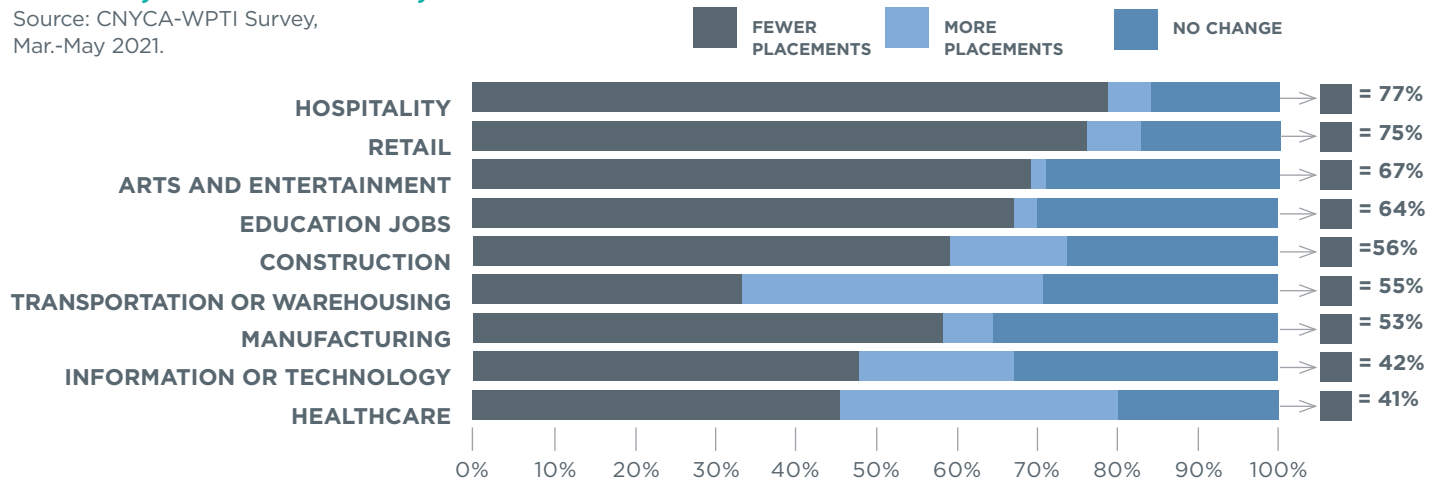
Workers highlighted the difficulty placing entry-level workers into jobs during Covid, when traditional routes for employment in service jobs were closed or came with increased risk, and when Pandemic Unemployment Assistance often paid more than many of these high-risk, entry-level jobs. Moreover, some respondents pointed out, clients of workforce organizations often have health considerations that make taking an essential worker job during Covid not right for them, or had childcare or elder care needs that prevented working outside the home. At the same time, workforce development professionals - especially job developers - felt pressure to place clients in jobs, due both to the clients' economic needs but also due to pressure to meet outcome requirements and metrics. Frontline workforce employees often found themselves in an additional bind, as well: entry-level workers need work experience and skills to qualify for better-paid jobs with lower risk, but the pandemic made getting work experience and hands-on training more difficult:

“The primary ‘good-fit’ labor market opportunities are for face-to-face service-sector jobs (e.g. building maintenance, construction, hospitality, retail) that currently are risky to work in or altogether unavailable. Job seekers can have few other options if they have educational attainment gaps, limited range of work experience, minimal digital skills, and/or other socioeconomic or at-risk life circumstances.”

The industries in which job seekers were placed changed dramatically, with over three quarters of survey respondents saying they had to shift their focus away from the industries they typically relied on to hire clients. Industries that saw the most dramatic drop in job placements were led by hospitality, retail, arts and entertainment, education, construction, and transportation.

**Figure 7.**  
**PERCENT SURVEY RESPONDENTS REPORTING INDUSTRIES WITH FEWER, NO CHANGE, OR MORE PLACEMENTS**

Source: CNYCA-WPTI Survey, Mar.-May 2021.



The economic context made placements much more difficult and put frontline workers in a double bind: their organization risked losing funding if they did not meet placement requirements, but frontline workers were also committed to the health and well-being of their clients whom they wanted to place in good as well as safe jobs. Lower placements, especially in hotels, retail, and the Arts reflect the severe job loss in the opening months of the pandemic as well as the slow recovery. In April 2020, New York City saw a 71 percent decline in employment across hotels, restaurants, and other food services compared to pre-pandemic levels. As of July 2021, employment levels in these industries that often provide important entry-level positions that frontline workforce professionals can help place their clients in remain 35 percent below pre-pandemic (February 2020) levels.<sup>3</sup> The slow return to pre-pandemic levels of business and tourism will mean that the workforce field will continue to face challenges in placing job seekers in industries like hospitality or retail that still have a long road to full recovery.

## Covid expanded work roles

During Covid, frontline workers often went above and beyond to help clients secure social assistance benefits that may have fallen outside their normal scope of work. Nearly half of respondents confirmed that they had helped clients secure unemployment insurance or food stamps (45 percent), even though of those who had done so, three quarters said it was not part of their job responsibilities prior to Covid (77 percent). Additionally, only just over a quarter said they had received adequate training on the processes for securing public and unemployment benefits (26 percent). One respondent wrote that they often had to drop what they were doing to help a client apply for unemployment and that applying for unemployment was difficult and time-consuming to navigate over zoom with clients inexperienced with technology.

One reentry frontline worker wrote about the difficulty of reaching clients, when “Rikers Island was totally shut off and our program had to close.” Some respondents wrote that they could continue to work remotely, but they missed the personal connection of seeing their clients face-to-face. And yet, others found that working from home allowed them greater personal flexibility and escape from the distractions of the office. Many reported that shifting to online work posed hugely time-consuming challenges at the beginning of Covid, but after months of adjusting to virtual programming, collaboration, and communication, they had found new sustainable routines.



**The difficulties presented by Covid were far-reaching and pervasive. One respondent wrote:**

“

**The pandemic’s economic crisis has made it extremely difficult to achieve programmatic and professional success, as measured by the workforce development field’s existing funding and operational structures. This has been compounded by unsustainable personal life conditions due to the pandemic.**

—RESPONDENT



There are fewer jobs available for job seekers, plus all the parents on my caseload have zero childcare options.

But overwhelmingly, frontline workers talked about the difficulty and distress they felt not being able to connect job seekers to work. Frontline workers found their relationships with potential employers more difficult to maintain and connections to clients more challenging to preserve without face-to-face meetings. Even with engaged clients though, frontline workers saw employment opportunities plummet. And, one respondent pointed out, “there are fewer jobs available for job seekers, plus all the parents on my caseload have zero childcare options.” Another frontline worker pointed out that she also struggled to find childcare help for her toddler and, along with inconsistent broadband, balancing work with caring for a young child, she found it “harder to productively interact with and engage stakeholders, including business representatives, coworkers, community leaders, and job seekers.”

The New Yorkers served by the city’s workforce development system are largely low-income, and people of color. These are populations for whom Covid-19 has been devastating, both economically and with regard to loss of life. From the earliest days of the pandemic, it has been clear that communities of color were hardest hit both by disease and by job loss. In the initial months of shutdown, an estimated 68 percent of jobs lost were held by workers of color. Latinx workers were 21 percent more likely to have lost their jobs than other workers and young adults and those with a high school degree or less were more likely to have suffered dislocation. Overall, nearly two-thirds of those who were dislocated during the initial severe downturn had annual workplace earnings of less than \$40,000, while less than 10 percent had earnings over \$100,000.<sup>4</sup> These low-income workers of color who were so broadly impacted are the same communities served by frontline workforce development employees.

Many are residents of public housing, where Covid-19 has had a particularly disproportionate impact as well. As a result, frontline workforce professionals have been working for the past 18 months to support individuals in communities particularly ravaged by Covid-19, facing severe trauma and grief, on top of existing economic pressure. This has likely had a powerful impact on both the clients themselves, and the individuals working to connect them with employment opportunities, often using a remote interface.



## EQUITY AND REPRESENTATION AMONG FRONTLINE WORKERS



The reflection of frontline worker demographics among managers and leadership influences not only worker perception about how well they are represented in their organization as well as how their voices are valued, but also forecasts for frontline workers their prospects for advancement.

Nearly a quarter of survey respondents were clients of a workforce development organization prior to working there, suggesting that there is a strong number of voices who can articulate the challenges of being a client as well as an employee in the workforce sector.

When asked about leadership, a majority of frontline workers felt satisfied about the diversity of representation in management. The strongest majority of respondents agreed that there were enough women in leadership positions at their organization (76 percent). A slightly less strong majority felt that the leadership at their organization was reflective of the frontline workers in the organization (61 percent), while an even slimmer majority felt there were enough people of color in leadership in the organization where they work (59 percent). Compared to the [Voices report using pre-Covid survey data](#) (March 2021), these numbers are remarkably consistent, suggesting that concern about representation in leadership and frontline staff remain and perceptions of both their importance and persistence were not altered by Covid.

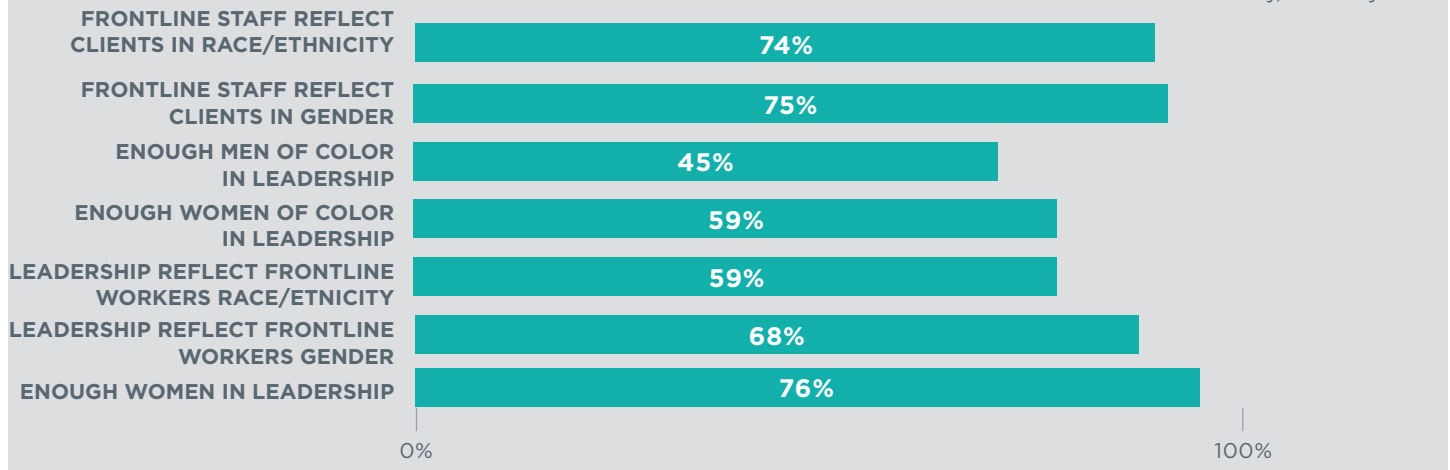


**Concern about representation in leadership and frontline staff remain and perceptions of both their importance and persistence were not altered by Covid.**

Figure 8.

**PERCENT OF FRONTLINE WORKER RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE THAT STAFF AND LEADERSHIP REFLECT CLIENT DEMOGRAPHICS**

Source: CNYCA-WPTI Survey, Mar.-May 2021.



Notably, when respondents are disaggregated by race and ethnicity, perceptions of representation in leadership and frontline staff are largely agreed upon across respondent groups. For example, when asked whether there are enough women in leadership, 90 percent of respondents of color agreed, 84 percent of white respondents agreed, and 82 percent of respondents agreed who declined to identify with any racial or ethnic categories. Similarly, when asked whether there were enough women of color in leadership, 57 of all respondents agreed, while 58 percent of respondents of color and 56 percent of white respondents agreed. While respondents indicated that organizations still have steps to take to make leadership more representative, this survey suggests that there is broad consensus among staff of all races and ethnicities that would support taking steps to create greater equity in those positions.

Because of the limits of sample size, the survey captured only a small number of respondents who identified as LGBTQIA+ (11 percent, with an additional 2 percent saying they were not sure and 5 percent preferring not to answer), however this percentage suggests that the representation may be higher among frontline staff than the [general population](#). However, because the workforce development field serves a high number of LGBTQIA+ clients (86 respondents said they worked for an organization that served LGBTQIA+ individuals), more tailored outreach to LGBTQIA+ staff members will be important to better understanding if frontline staff see enough representation of LGBTQIA+ client voices and perspectives in their organization. Similarly, only 6 percent of respondents responded that they had a disability, while 60 respondents said they worked for an organization serving clients with disabilities and 81 respondents said they worked for an organization serving clients with mental health issues.





## SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACES FOR DEMANDING WORK: WORKER MORALE, PEER NETWORKS, AND EFFECTIVE MANAGERS



Frontline workers in workforce development navigate emotionally-demanding jobs, often juggling multiple responsibilities in their efforts to train, educate, place, and provide wrap-around services for clients while also meeting substantial reporting requirements. Demanding jobs and relatively low pay make worker morale, coworker relationships, and supportive, effective management crucial to the sector.

### Mission-oriented, creative problem-solvers value autonomy but need support

Workers overwhelmingly report being well-informed supporters and believers in their organization's purpose: 95 percent of respondents said they understood their organization's purpose and it was very important to them. Additionally, a strong majority reported feeling overall satisfaction with their job (84 percent).

Furthermore, workers feel independent and enabled to exercise initiative, judgment, and creativity in their jobs (88 percent strongly agreed or agreed). However, some workers felt that peers and managers could do more to recognize their hard work, with more than a quarter of respondents feeling that their successes in navigating challenging work could be more appreciated—formally or informally—by managers and coworkers (27 percent).

While workers appreciated that their jobs allow autonomy in exercising creative judgment, four out of five workers also reported feeling connected to and supported by their coworkers (80 percent agreed or strongly agreed). More than three quarters of workers felt that their supervisor provided helpful feedback on their performance. The remaining quarter of workers felt neutral or disagreed that managers provided enough helpful comments and advice.

### Safe workspace with trusted coworkers but limited resources

Respondents highlighted important aspects of workforce workplace culture that they valued. Most felt physically safe (79 percent agreed or strongly agreed) and emotionally safe (84 percent) at work. Additionally, the large majority of frontline workers felt that they had someone trustworthy at their workforce they could go to with their concerns (87 percent).

While workers gave their workplaces high scores in emotional and physical safety, they were more concerned about limited resources that stretched workers' capacity. Nearly a third of workers felt they did not have enough time to perform their job as well as they would like (30 percent), while more than a quarter of workers felt they did not have enough resources in the form of space, technology, or infrastructure to fulfill their tasks at the level they would like (27 percent). Despite these resource constraints, most workers felt they could adequately meet client needs (87 percent agreed or strongly agreed) either with resources internal to their organization or through referrals to external organizations.

## IMAGINING A FUTURE IN FRONTLINE WORK



Nearly a third of workers felt they did not have enough time to perform their job as well as they would like

“I love working with people seeking employment,” one respondent wrote, while adding, “there are higher paying opportunities where I could also build my skillset.” For many respondents, it’s a field of work that they’ve chosen, but even anticipating the low salary, many have found the low income and challenging workload—especially during the pandemic—to be a hard load to bear. “I need a better salary, more resources, and better training,” wrote one respondent.

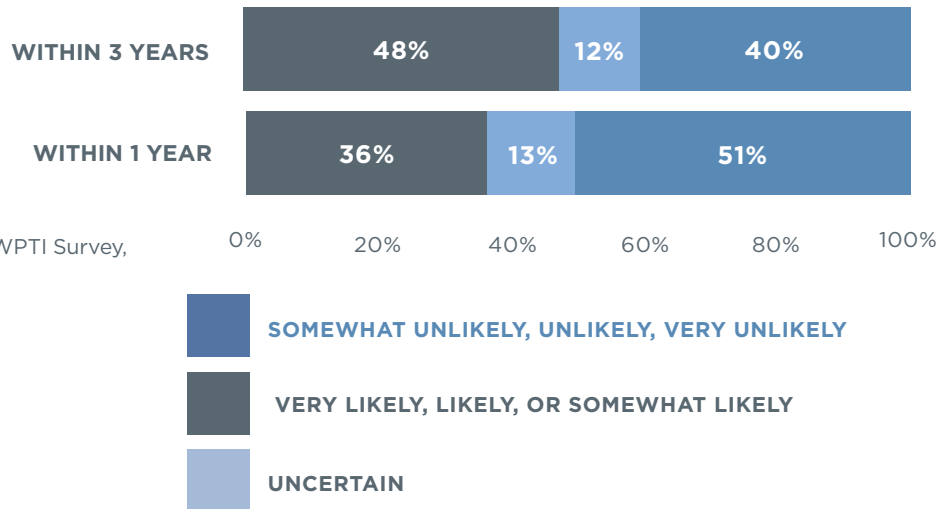
Overall, even respondents likely to seek other employment expressed high levels of commitment to their work and were torn about the prospect of leaving. “I enjoy my job; I am making a difference in the community I want to work for,” wrote one respondent, adding, “I will stay for a while because I have good leadership and feel supported in my role.”

Despite the financial stressors of frontline work, many respondents felt it would be somewhat difficult (36 percent), difficult (15 percent), or very difficult (9 percent) to find a job in the New York City area with another employer that would offer the same salary and benefits. And, overall, 64 percent said it would be somewhat to very difficult to find a job with better income or benefits. And, a majority said it was unlikely they would search for another job within the next year (51 percent), with an additional 13 percent saying they were uncertain. Only 17 percent thought it was “very likely” they would look for another job within 12 months, with increased to 28 percent when the timeframe was extended to 3 years. See Figure 9. A majority of respondents though remain committed to staying in the New York Area, with nearly 60 percent saying it was unlikely they would search for a job outside the metro area.

Those workers who said they were likely to seek another job tended to emphasize their need to find positions with better ladders for advancement, with some looking specifically for better pay a workers and others focused on positions with more decision-making power. Even those who said they would likely try to find a different job frequently expressed a reluctance to leave the field: “I feel a sense of loyalty to my agency and I love what I do,” on person who said nevertheless said she would likely have to leave for a job with “more financial security.”

Figure 9.

## FRONTLINE RESPONDENTS CONSIDERING SEARCHING FOR ANOTHER JOB WITHIN 1-3 YEARS



Some felt their decision to stay rested on external funding and staffing decisions—“only layoffs would get me to leave, but that’s possible,” wrote one respondent. Resource shortages made the workplace untenable for others. One worker wrote, “I’m great at what I do—but I’m always tasked to do additional work and spend only about 25% of my time doing what I was hired to do. I get it done, but I should be paid more to perform the tasks for multiple jobs” Low pay was a frequent reason for contemplating leaving: “I can’t survive off 40k a year on my 5th year of direct client services.” “It’s the pay,” said another respondent, “because though I truly enjoy what I do, the pay is not enough to pay NYC bills.”

Low pay and job stress were recurrent themes across all respondents. But despite the low pay, some respondents pointed out that because they and their families relied on their employer for health care (64 percent), and, if they lost their jobs would be unable to rely on a partner for health care (63 percent), the job provided crucial physical health and mental health services especially during the pandemic. Bolstering these benefits is one way, many respondents pointed out, with better paid time off, more flexibility, and more autonomy, organizations could do better for their frontline staff.



There needs to a better culture—room for growth and improvement, alongside better salaries and more respect for frontline staff.

Respondents highlighted reducing placement pressures and increasing frontline staff participation in decision-making as areas that organizations could improve internally: “There needs to a better culture—room for growth and improvement, alongside better salaries and more respect for frontline staff.” Other staff members felt burned out by the workload of the past year in particular, but also of the sector in general: “I plan to leave; the pace is dizzying and exhausting, and we are chronically under-resourced. I also am seeking opportunities to learn and grow.”

The field presents workers with stiff challenges, but also moments of deep reward, as one respondent wrote, “It feels good to be supporting immigrants like myself.” Balancing the shortcomings and the potential for reward in the sector will be a crucial conversation for workforce employers and for New York City leadership, as the city looks toward these frontline staff to provide a crucial municipal service to reconnect workers to employment and help the city emerge from the Covid economic crisis.

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I plan to leave; the pace is dizzying and exhausting, and we are chronically under-resourced. I also am seeking opportunities to learn and grow.

—RESPONDENT

# CONCLUSION

New York City's workforce development system, like the broader human services sector, has played a critical role in supporting New Yorkers as they dealt with the economic and human impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. As the city faced double-digit unemployment, particularly among New Yorkers of color and those in lower-wage sectors of the economy like hospitality and retail, workforce development professionals continued to provide career training, connect workers to jobs, and facilitate access to a wide array of supportive services that helped workers and their families survive these challenging times. Meanwhile, these workforce professionals coped with challenges of their own, from economic precarity to a rapid shift to remote work, all while often being part of communities that were themselves hardest hit by the health and economic crises.

Meanwhile, it is estimated that it may take up to five years for New York City's job market to return to its pre-pandemic state, meaning that the work of New York City's workforce development system is more important than ever, and will continue to be for the foreseeable future. It is in this environment that it is critical to look at the needs of these workforce professionals. As the city seeks to build toward an equitable economic recovery, these professionals will be tasked with upskilling and reskilling New York City's workers for a changed, increasingly digital economy.

Despite low-pay and high stress in their work, frontline workers are widely committed to the meaning and importance of their work. This report outlines how the workforce sector might better support their committed workforce through addressing compensation, training, and support needs. While these workforce professionals care deeply about their work and the communities they serve, they also report that without better pay, benefits, and career advancement opportunities, a high number are considering looking for other work. The experience and commitment of these workers will be critical as New York re bounds from the pandemic. Retaining these workers and helping them flourish should be a priority among professionals in the workforce development field and in the economic landscape of New York City more broadly.

In the coming weeks, WPTI will publish a list of recommendations, aimed at key stakeholders – ranging from government to philanthropy to leaders across the workforce development system. As the city looks forward to a new mayoral administration, we hope these recommendations, based upon empirical data, will offer a roadmap forward, ensuring that New York City's workforce development professionals are sufficiently supported and valued.



# APPENDIX

The WPTI-CNYCA Frontline Worker Survey was developed following The New School's institutional review board (IRB) ethical guidelines to protect human subjects. The Workforce Professionals Training Institute distributed the survey to its email list-serve of more than two thousand workforce professionals in New York City that serve or represent a diverse swath of New York City's frontline workforce development workforce.

The survey was distributed by WPTI, using a unique Qualtrics link, with responses going directly to the author's New School Qualtrics account. The Qualtrics survey protection filter was used so that survey users had to use the provided link to connect to the survey. The Qualtrics filter to prevent search engines from indexing it was used to prevent fraudulent responses.

The survey responses span March through May 2021. The survey resulted in 206 sufficiently complete responses.

## Demographics of 2021 Survey Respondents

Overall, the 2021 demographics of the survey's respondents were similar to those of the January/February 2020 survey prior to Covid, providing a good basis for comparing the two snapshots of workforce development employees.

The 2021 survey respondents reflected a large majority of women (65 versus 67 percent in 2020), and the same percentage of Black (35 percent), White (24 percent versus 21 percent in 2020) respondents, but with an increased number of Latinx respondents (28 percent versus 19 percent in 2020). In 2021, respondents were overall highly educated, with 70 percent having at least a bachelor's degree, though this percentage is slightly lower than that in the 2020 survey, which had 74 percent of respondents holding a BA or graduate degree. The difference was reflected in a higher percentage of 2021 respondents having some college or an Associates degree (24 percent compared to 21 percent in 2020).

## SURVEY RESPONDENTS DEMOGRAPHICS

### Race/ethnicity

Black .....	35%
Latinx.....	28%
White .....	24%
Asian & Others .....	7%

### Age

18-22.....	1%
23-29.....	19%
30-39 .....	23%
40-49.....	19%
50-59 .....	23%
60+ .....	10%
Prefer not to answer.....	6%

### Gender

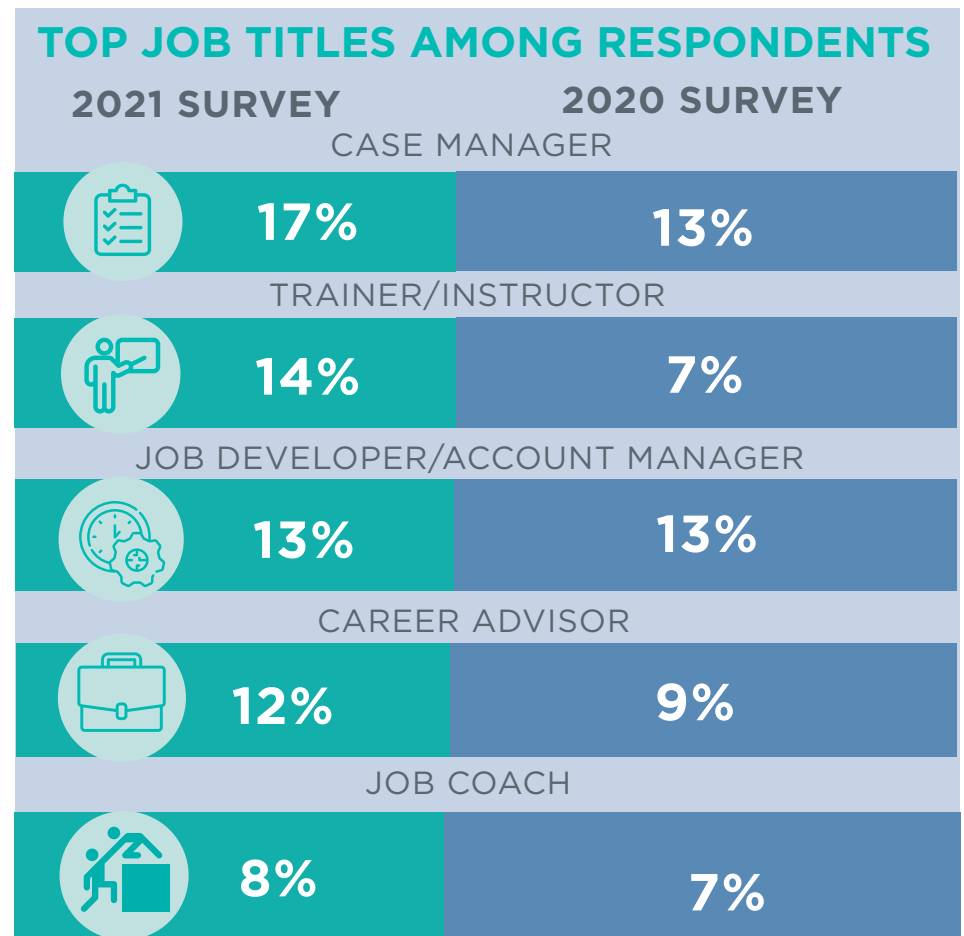
Female.....	65%
Male.....	28%
Non-binary .....	5%
Prefer not to say .....	5%

### Education

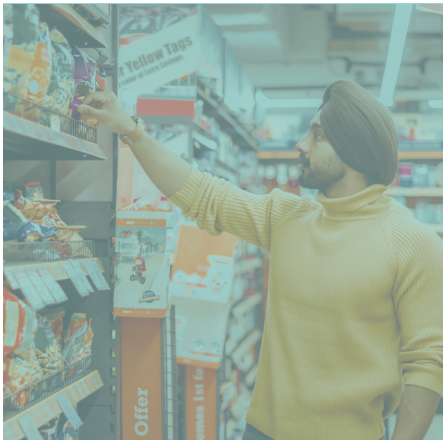
<HS.....	1%
HS .....	5%
Some college.....	11%
Associate's degree.....	13%
Bachelor's degree .....	37%
BA+ .....	33%

This survey showed similar demographics and job titles among its respondents even though 30 percent of respondents were confident they had not filled out the previous survey and 43 percent were uncertain. Only 27 percent of respondents could be confident they had filled out the previous iteration of the survey. The demographics similarity among the two years' of survey respondents allowed us to speak with greater confidence of this sample as offering a representative picture year to year of the workforce development frontline workforce.

The 2021 Survey offers a slightly different snapshot of the jobs held in workforce development than the 2020 survey with a higher percentage of respondents who were case managers and career advisers.



Source: CNYCA-WPTI Survey, Mar.-May 2021.



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**It's the pay...  
because though  
I truly enjoy  
what I do,  
the pay is not  
enough to pay  
NYC bills.**

—RESPONDENT

When asked about their top responsibilities and duties, respondents offered lists of most frequent activities that closely reflected those of the survey a year before, with data entry and management topping the list, followed by job readiness and soft skills instruction, and career counseling. Overall, the similarity of the demographics and job titles allowed for robust comparison among the 2020 and 2021 survey respondents.



“

**While right now, during Covid-19, it's a tough  
job market, it's also been so hard this year,  
that I want to search for something where  
I have more opportunity to move up, get a  
promotion, and better benefits.**

—RESPONDENT

## ENDNOTES



1. James Parrott, “It’s not just a New York City problem; pandemic losses in the rest of New York also far surpass national averages,” Center for New York City Affairs, September 30, 2021.
2. James Parrott, “It’s a longer road to recovery for the labor market-- Covid’s impact has been lopsided, reshuffling employment demands, and causing historic long-term joblessness,” Center for New York City Affairs, August 12, 2021.
- 3 James Parrott and Sierra Lewandowski, “A Long and Slow Road to Recovery in New York City’s Hospitality Sector in the Wake of Covid-19,” Center for New York City Affairs, September 2021.
- 4 James Parrott, “New York City’s Covid-19 Economy Will Not Snap Back,” CNYCA Affairs, February 2021.