

**National Veterans' Technical Assistance Center (NVTAC)
Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) Community of Practice (CoP)
Self-Care for Providers
Thursday, January 26, 2023, 3:00 – 4:00 p.m. ET**

NVTAC Staff

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Key Points

- **Introduction**
 - NVTAC coaches welcomed grantees to the January 2023 HVRP CoP event covering self-care for providers.
 - This session highlighted perceptions of providers working in the field that contribute to burnout, the symptoms and signs of burnout, and tips to prevent and alleviate burnout.
- **Perceptions of the Field**
 - The coaches covered how individual and systemic perceptions in the field lead to burnout. This includes how being a provider impacts you personally, as well as the impact of cultural perceptions within your organization. To prevent and alleviate burnout, it is important to be self-aware and recognize these perceptions. Staff turnover is often a result of burnout.
 - The savior complex means providers may go into the field with altruistic intentions expecting to improve the lives of or “save” every veteran with whom they work. This may cause providers to focus more on veterans that are struggling with the reintegration process compared to other clients, which could then negatively impact the provider’s mental health.
 - Negative self-talk could surface if providers blame themselves for veteran reintegration cases that are not as successful as they hoped. This may be due to veterans not responding positively to assistance or leaving the program. Providers may question themselves, interpreting the lack of veteran success as an internal problem on their behalf.
 - There is often a systemic idea that “this is part of the work,” meaning providers feel the need to completely solve the issue of veteran homelessness. Providers may negatively reflect on their sense of self-worth, as there continues to be veterans experiencing homelessness.
 - Agencies may promote policies that suggest providers have no boundaries and are always available, or providers may perceive themselves that way. For example, providers who give their personal phone numbers to veterans they work with and tell them they can call anytime are not setting proper boundaries. Providers in management roles also need to have boundaries with their employees.

- **Grantee Comment:** There are varying degrees of dedication among staff. She highlighted the importance of learning about staff and how to balance the workload and expectations along with staff personalities, especially with the repercussions of COVID-19 and the crisis it created for housing veterans, saving their lives, and assisting them in generating income. This crisis required providers to work more than eight hours a day, and there was an expectation that providers would answer calls outside of work hours. As a result, many providers left the profession. Currently, recruiting staff is more difficult than before COVID-19. Giving staff adequate support to manage the stress created by the pandemic is an important duty for managers.
- **Recognizing the Symptoms of Burnout**
 - Self-awareness is key in recognizing the symptoms of burnout to mitigate negative impacts. Symptoms of burnout include:
 - Providers taking on the clients' trauma or empathy turning into sympathy. Case management should be approached with empathy, not sympathy. To prevent this, providers should reflect on sessions with veterans to assess ways in which they were sympathetic instead of empathetic and how they may be transferring their veterans' trauma to themselves.
 - Providers may be irritable or impatient with colleagues, clients, or family. People close to providers may comment on these behaviors, and it is important for providers to sincerely consider their feedback.
 - Providers may have trouble concentrating or lack a sense of presence in sessions with veterans or while spending time with others. Also, providers may become cynical or critical at work concerning colleagues or the work itself.
 - Providers may feel stressed due to their workload and feel fatigued. They may also neglect to exercise or sleep.
 - Providers may bring their work home with them instead of having a clear boundary between work and home life (e.g., thinking about cases over the weekend).
- **Prevention Strategies**
 - Once burnout symptoms are identified, providers should develop action steps to mitigate the negative impacts of burnout.
 - Providers should be mindful about transparent communication with their teams and loved ones. Open conversations amongst team members about understanding the risks of burnout in organizational practices can be helpful. If symptoms of burnout are not addressed in a healthy way, they will get worse over time.
 - Providers should identify and set boundaries with clients, colleagues, and family, like having a set time to stop work communication or putting away their phone when spending time with their families. Providers should understand that the veterans must put in the work to better their circumstances, and the provider is there to support them. This thought pattern prevents providers from developing the savior complex.

- Veterans should have independent work to do on their own time, like submitting job applications, outside of time spent in provider sessions. This is their journey, and they will feel more accomplished when they succeed, thanks to their own hard work. The veterans need to refine and use the tools introduced by providers. Boundaries allow for more productivity and should be reinforced and reiterated.
- Taking some time off, if possible, or making time for exercise like karate or yoga may be beneficial.
- QTIP (quit taking it personally) is a helpful acronym to keep in mind when feeling frustrated or overwhelmed.
- **Available Resources**
 - Providers can leverage resources offered to veterans for themselves to create a self-care plan. They can write down their plan to be more intentional about implementing the plan (e.g., remember to drink water, take a walk, etc.).
 - The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a helpful resource for accessing mental health services, especially processing the loss of a client.
 - Providers should seek peer support and be vulnerable about any struggles they are having with colleagues or loved ones.
 - Providers should utilize available community activities; there may be low-cost or free events that can greatly benefit them. Colleagues, community boards, or loved ones may have information about these events.

Discussion

- **Discussion Question:** What are you currently doing to prevent burnout?
 - **Grantee Response:** Performance measures must be met as an HVRP grantee regardless of whether the grant is short-staffed. I tell my team that as long as we give an honest day of work and do the best that we can, we can come back the next day and try again. We do not have to be everything to everybody.
 - **NVTAC Response:** Reiterating these affirmations to your team is important. You cannot solve everything in one day.
 - **Grantee Response:** Our team takes at least 30 minutes each day to get away from everything and decompress.
 - **NVTAC Response:** If you have some time to intentionally step away from your work, even if it is just for a moment to center yourself, it can help prevent burnout.
 - **Grantee Response:** I intentionally charge my work phone away from my bed, so I do not check it first thing in the morning.
 - **NVTAC Response:** This sounds like such a small thing but having your work phone with you keeps you connected to work at all times. Not checking your work phone the moment you wake up can be a boundary that makes a big difference in mitigating stress. Perhaps you can follow a morning routine that works for you and makes you feel good, whatever that may be.
 - **Grantee Response:** Stress-free Fridays. We reserve our Fridays to catch up on notes, and there are no client meetings.

- **Grantee Response:** I am due for a camping trip. I do not feel comfortable requesting time off as I have not met my monthly quotas, but I try to use that as a work incentive. Work hard, play hard.
- **NVTAC Response:** Meeting quotas is very important and taking the time you need to care for yourself can improve your performance. You need a good work-life balance.
- **Discussion Question:** What are you currently doing to sustain self-care?
 - **Grantee Response:** We share the work as a team to minimize job stress.
 - **NVTAC Response:** Creating a strong team dynamic avoids having any one person feeling overwhelmed or defeated.
 - **Grantee Response:** I take my dog on a walk as soon as I get home to decompress and prepare to be home.
 - **Grantee Response:** I recharge my battery on the days I go to church.
 - **NVTAC Response:** It is important to have a place where you can unwind, relax, and recharge. You have to remember to take the time to go there when you can.
 - **Grantee Response:** I try to make sleep a priority.
 - **NVTAC Response:** Consistently getting enough sleep can be very beneficial for self-care.

Conclusion

- NVTAC provided the link to a survey in the chat.
- NVTAC thanked participants for attending and being open to discuss self-care and sharing personal examples.