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Investigative Panel into building and retaining an effective homelessness sector workforce

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AHURi

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Acronyms and abbreviations used in this report

AQF Australian Qualification Framework

AHURI Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute

AIHW Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

ASU Australian Service Union

CALD culturally and linguistically diverse

CHP Council to Homeless Persons

ERO equal renumeration order

NGO non-government organisation

NHHA National Housing and Homelessness Agreement

P-E person–environment

SCHADS Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry

SHS Specialist homelessness services

TEQSA Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency

TMGT too-much-of-a-good-thing

VET vocational education and training

Glossary

A list of definitions for terms commonly used by AHURI is available on the AHURI website ahuri.edu.au/glossary.

Executive summary

Key points

- This project adopted an organisational psychology perspective to explore the effective workforce preparation, attraction, recruitment and sustainment strategies required to deliver a better developed and supported specialist homelessness services (SHS) sector workforce.

- The work undertaken within the SHS sector is increasingly complex and places high demands on staff, presents challenges with respect to meeting the physical and psychological needs of staff, and has weak employer brand awareness. In combination, these pressures contribute to staffing shortages and worker retention issues. Meanwhile, the demands for these services are continuing to increase.

- SHS agencies are aware of the challenges and have implemented a range of strategies to improve financial security, motivation and the recruitment of a skilled workforce. However, given the resource constraints these organisations face, their capacity to continue to meet these challenges is limited.

- A range of organisation- and sector-level policy recommendations have been made to better prepare, attract, recruit and retain employees in the sector, including training and development, redistribution of tasks away from administrative activities for frontline and managerial positions, raising brand awareness of the sector and modifying recruitment strategies.

- **Changes implemented by individual SHS organisations will have limited impact on the overall sustainability of the workforce in the sector unless significant policy reform is made to the funding model. The sustainability and development of the sector workforce on a meaningful scale also requires the supply of social and affordable housing, improved job security, access to more competitive remuneration and improved investment into workforce training and development. These changes require state- and national-level government commitment.**

Key findings

The funding model heavily influences SHS sector workforce operations

SHS organisations are responding to workforce challenges at an organisational or regional level. The Investigative Panels revealed that state funding has the greatest capacity to shape how the SHS sector operates and the effectiveness of its workforce. While SHS agencies have important roles to play in building the capacity of the workforce, it is the state, through funding SHS, that has the most significant influence over the workforce. The existing funding model affects work design by not appropriately funding SHS organisations to meet service agreements to provide staff with ongoing training or clinical supervision; not allowing for the financial security of SHS employees (i.e. not providing sufficient remuneration or job security); and hindering the capacity of SHS agencies to satisfy their employees' basic psychological needs, negatively affecting employee engagement and retention. Finally, the current model hampers organisations' ability to attract and retain competent staff and to cooperate with other local organisations that would enhance the services provided.

Underfunding and understaffing impedes work design that supports staff wellbeing

The work design in the SHS sector is complex and places high demands on employees, including emotional demands and indirect trauma, which are a function of the role and unlikely to be mitigated. To respond to client needs and undertake their roles successfully, employees are required to possess a diverse skillset that intersects with a wide range of areas, including health, housing and family and domestic violence. Staff are required to work largely independently and the level of support in the workplace, while varied, is often limited. Work design exists in a context. In the SHS sector, work design is affected by structural factors (i.e. the funding model, availability of housing and educational pathways) that contribute to the underfunding and understaffing of the sector and shape the day-to-day activities of the workers. There are a number of organisation-level opportunities that exist to improve work design to benefit the wellbeing and performance of workers, including:

- increase levels of support, including peer supervision, manager supervision and clinical supervision

- further develop well-connected teams that can share resources and provide co-worker social support

- balance the level of 'stimulating' and 'agency' characteristics in the work design

- utilise job crafting to empower workers to make changes in their work to better suit their needs and capacity

- reduce work demands where practicable, especially extraneous administrative tasks that could be completed by a non-frontline worker.

Investigative Panel members called for a funding model that takes account of the operational roles as they are undertaken, placed-based distinctions and the real cost of delivering the services.

Financial insecurity and lack of housing supply negatively impact motivation and retention

Motivation and retention of staff are shaped by the extent to which workplaces can meet the physical and psychological needs of employees. The research found that these needs are not being sufficiently met in the SHS sector, and that this is affecting the wellbeing of staff and preventing them from achieving other aspirations in life outside of work. Low remuneration, short contracts and the competitive funding model are negatively affecting employee financial security, with similarly adverse implications for staff retention. In addition, perceptions of low competency due to a lack of training and supervision, limited career progression opportunities and the difficulties associated with housing clients given the shortage of affordable dwellings are preventing employees' from achieving their own psychological needs. However, SHS agencies work hard to ensure that employees feel meaningfully connected with one another by placing importance on staff successes, and creating opportunities for staff to celebrate such successes. The delivery of training and external supervision programs under COVID-19 additional funding packages have been well received by staff; however, such investment is not likely to be financially viable long-term, despite the positive impact it has had on staff retention.

To improve lasting motivation and retention of employees in the sector there is a need for:

- greater financial security, including renumeration and job security, that matches the condition in other employment sectors

- defined career progression opportunities

- sufficient training and development opportunities to support career progression

- managers who can concentrate on delivering a leadership approach that allows staff to participate and fulfil their needs for autonomy rather than on chasing funding.

The biggest change required to solve most of the motivational and retention challenges encountered by SHS organisations and the sector as a whole is the funding model.

Poor sector awareness and reliance on traditional recruitment channels are barriers to workforce growth

Attracting applicants at all, let alone skilled or qualified applicants, to SHS organisations appears to be extremely challenging. The continued reliance on traditional recruitment strategies (e.g. placement students, people with lived experience) will limit the sector's ability to grow the labour pool; therefore, diversification is strongly recommended (i.e. attracting more workers from under-represented groups such as men and cultural minorities). Further, panel members explained that organisations find that applicants have expectations about the role that do not match some of the realities of what needs to be done. For example, staff need to have mental health support skills and social worker skills, yet these are not 'meant' to be part of the job as described in position descriptions and job advertisements, nor are they reflected in the compensation. This is partly attributed to the poor levels of awareness about the nature of the work in the sector, stemming from the lack of content relevant to homelessness in vocational education and training (VET) and higher education programs.

From a sector or individual SHS organisation perspective, the opportunities for growth and for attracting and recruiting workers include:

- improving employer brand awareness, and the reputation of the SHS sector more generally, to attract and recruit skilled and qualified applicants

- expanding the applicant pool through diversification of recruitment strategies, noting that targeted recruitment is challenging and may require additional support

- working with tertiary education institutions to improve the skills and abilities of students to meet the requirements of the roles

- improving value proposition (i.e. what employers can offer to recruits) to attract skilled employees.

What are the priorities for policy response?

National Housing and Homelessness Agreement

The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) strongly influences how the workforce operates, and reforms in keeping with this agreement should be seen as an opportunity to demonstrably enhance the capacity of the SHS workforce.

Policy priorities include the need for increased Commonwealth funding based on recent data and the growth in demand since the NHHA was established.

There is also a need for reform of the delivery framework through which funds are delivered by the states and territories. Reform of the competitive funding model used to distribute funds to the SHS sector should:

- recognise the complexity of work being undertaken and close the gap between contract costs and the price of delivering the services, including place-based differences and the costs of administration and reporting requirements

- allow SHS agencies to respond to the needs in their local community by expanding specialist areas as required and supporting collaboration between organisations

- recognise the ongoing need for the services that are currently being delivered and commit to closing the discrepancy between the public and SHS sector by mirroring the benefits available to staff in government positions and assisting to establish career progression pathways, thereby reducing job insecurity

- extend funding cycles and lead times between contract renewals or new funding commitments and the commencement of programs.

Greater investment in social and affordable housing is required

Significant investment in affordable housing and crisis accommodation for client groups, as well as intermediate forms of affordable housing for sector workers themselves, is required to support an effective SHS workforce. This investment is particularly important in terms of motivation and retention of current and future employees.

Sector training and development support

The providers of formal education pathways through TAFE and university need to be aware of the increasingly specialised needs of the sector and to better assist students to understand what jobs in the SHS sector entail. They also need to engage in further consultation with the sector to ensure that the correct skills are being developed. To reduce the impact on SHS service providers, placements should be arranged with what fits best for the organisation, rather than the university or TAFE.

The study

Three Investigative Panels, held during September and October 2022, were the primary research vehicle, capturing the views of over 30 SHS sector industry experts, such as CEOs, managers and peak or advocacy bodies. Panel member selection aimed to reflect the priorities, areas and modes of service delivery available within the sector, as well as ensuring that regional areas were represented. The three-hour Investigative Panels were conducted online using MS Teams and were guided by the following research sub-questions:

- What opportunities exist to improve work design within the homelessness sector to benefit the wellbeing and performance of workers?

- What shapes the quality and lasting motivation of homelessness sector workers and how do incentive and performance management structures affect worker motivation and retention?

- What are the current strategies for attracting workers to the homelessness sector and where are the opportunities for growth?

- What policy and practice changes are needed to create a nationally coordinated approach to sector workforce development that could more efficiently enhance sector capabilities and career pathways across the country?

Recognising that this research related to the workforce within the homelessness sector, rather than the outcomes of the sector for clients, this research adopted an organisational psychology perspective. This allowed for an exploration of the effective workforce preparation, attraction, recruitment and sustainment strategies required to deliver a better developed and supported SHS sector workforce.

The Investigative Panel sessions were recorded and transcribed, and chat logs were saved for analysis against the research sub-questions. Discussions in the Investigative Panels were informed by interviews of over 30 frontline staff and managers, a literature review of grey literature and a desktop review of other relevant materials. The findings from these preliminary investigations were circulated to Investigative Panel members in a Discussion Paper prior to the session. The Discussion Paper also included background to the organisational psychology approach being applied.

1. Introduction

- **The SHS sector provides critical frontline services to people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness and assists households to find appropriate and affordable shelter options.**

- **For at least a decade, the sector has been challenged by the ability to attract, retain and develop an effective workforce to support those in need. At the same time, demand for the services the sector provides has increased.**

- **Work within the sector has also become increasingly complex in its service delivery, requiring a specialised and highly trained workforce.**

- **This research seeks to understand the policy and practice environment required to build and retain an effective homelessness sector workforce.**

1.1 The SHS sector and its workforce challenges

In Australia, individuals or households who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness are supported by a broad homelessness services system that brings together intergovernmental policy and practice frameworks to deliver homelessness services at a local level (Spinney, Beer et al. 2020). As shown in Table 1, the actors within this system include Australian and state and territory governments, locally based SHS organisations, and individuals and households seeking assistance. While the Australian Government's primary role is in resourcing and setting broad objectives and policy directives around resolving homelessness, state and territory governments are responsible for funding distribution to service organisations and strategy. Service providers (SHS organisations) operate at the critical frontline of the service system, providing direct support to individuals and households.

Table 1: Australian homelessness service system

Actors	Role
Australian Government	• Resource provision through the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement • Objectives relating to resolving homelessness
State and territory governments	• Distribution of funds • Strategy development
Local, place-based stakeholders (e.g. SHS organisations)	• Provision of services such as accommodation, tenancy support, outreach and case management, as well as other social services to those experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness
People who are homeless or at risk of homelessness	• Beneficiaries of support

Source: Adapted from Spinney, Beer et al. (2020: 20).

The SHS sector supports some of the most vulnerable individuals in our society. As the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP 2020a: 1) notes:

> People without secure housing need skills and high-performing workers to assist them to navigate the SHS and human services systems and to give them every chance of the best outcomes.

The SHS sector is the current iteration of a longstanding sector that has supported those who are homeless, or are at risk of homelessness, in Australia. There has been considerable change over time with different providers and funding bodies delivering services. For at least a decade, the sector has been challenged by the ability to attract, retain and develop an effective workforce to support those in need (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2011; CHP 2020b; Martin, Phillips et al. 2012). At the same time, demand for services is increasing. Therefore, there is an urgent need to rethink how the sector is developed and supported if it is to continue to deliver services to clients into the future.

1.1.1 SHS sector overview

The SHS sector consists of agencies, either not-for-profit or for-profit, receiving government funding to deliver services to clients who are homeless or to prevent homelessness from occurring. SHS agencies are often registered charities and are supported by a number of peak bodies nationally, such as Shelter Australia and Homelessness Australia. Nationally, 1,698 agencies currently deliver specialist services to a broad range of client groups, from young people and families to those seeking refuge from family violence. While some SHS agencies are large providers, supporting more than 1,500 people each year, almost half are small providers supporting fewer than 100 people each year (Productivity Commission 2022). SHS agencies operate in diverse locations from major metropolitan regions to remote areas.

As reported by AIHW (2022a), in 2020–21, the sector supported almost 278,300 clients who were homeless or at risk of homelessness, which represents a growth of 1.8 per cent per year since 2011–12. A profile of clients found that:

- almost 60 per cent were female

- almost one-third were aged under 18 years

- 42 per cent had experienced family and domestic violence

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were over-represented (28%).

Increases in mental health issues among clients were also reported, with 32 per cent of SHS clients nationally requiring mental health assistance.

The primary aim of the SHS sector is to assist people to find secure, appropriate and affordable shelter options over both the short- and long-term to reduce the number of Australians who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Stable housing might include social housing or private rental accommodation. In addition, AIHW (2021) lists a range of services that fit within the SHS remit, including:

- support to access accommodation and sustain tenancies

- outreach

- case management

- practical domestic assistance

- specialist social services such as family violence and disability services, drug and alcohol counselling, legal/ financial services and immigration/cultural services.

These services range from advocacy and practical domestic assistance to supporting the physical or mental wellbeing of clients through referrals or other mechanisms. The list reflects the wide-ranging capabilities and knowledge required by SHS employees. These have become increasingly specialised and complex over the last decade, requiring an increasingly qualified and experienced workforce (Gallup, Briglio et al. 2020; Spinney 2018). The Productivity Commission (2022) has also observed that the complexity of clients' needs is becoming more extreme. A report by the New South Wales Ombudsman (2022) identified the significant challenges that SHS agencies and, in particular, their workforce are experiencing in meeting the needs of people presenting with challenging conditions and behaviours, such as drug and alcohol addiction.

Further, research shows that not only has the complexity of the work increased but also demand for services (AIHW 2021; Productivity Commission 2022). Indeed, in a recent *Australian homelessness monitor*, Pawson, Clarke et al. (2022) note that demand for services during 2021–22 increased by 8 per cent compared to demand in 2017–18. This increase in demand for SHS is greater in regional Australia than in capital cities. Flatau, Zaretzky et al. (2017: 50) argue that:

> Homelessness is a long-term issue requiring long-term programs. The current ability of services to access non-government funding is limited and often for one-off and short-term initiatives. It is not adequate, nor does it offer the level of stability required to provide core programs. Where core government funding is not available, services report reduced ability to meet client demand and other service objectives.

1.1.2 Resourcing the SHS sector

Specialist homelessness services in Australia are heavily reliant on government funding. Analysis of the funding profile in the SHS sector found that 84.6 per cent of funding was received through government housing and homelessness agreements, a figure that increased to 94.3 per cent when Indigenous-focused services were considered (Flatau, Zaretzky et al. 2017). The heavy reliance on government funding by homelessness services began in the 1980s following the launch of the Australian Government Supported Accommodation Assistance Program and, later, the National Affordable Housing Agreement and associated National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (Flatau, Wood et al. 2015). The remaining funding utilised by the SHS sector comes via non-government sources, including non-government organisations (NGOs) that deliver services on the ground and philanthropy (Productivity Commission 2022). Government sources are, therefore, central to the delivery of homelessness services in Australia and, by extension, the effectiveness of the workforce delivering those services.

National Housing and Homelessness Agreement

Currently, the NHHA is the primary vehicle funding the delivery of homelessness services and, therefore, the SHS sector (Spinney, Beer et al. 2020). The NHHA commenced in July 2018 and is the most recent iteration in a succession of federal–state housing agreements that have been in place in Australia since 1945 (Productivity Commission 2021). It recognises the mutual interest of the Commonwealth and the states and territories in improving housing outcomes across the housing spectrum, including for Australians who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The purpose of the NHHA is to create a framework through which the jurisdictions can work together to improve '*access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing across the housing spectrum, including to prevent and address homelessness*' (Council on Federal Financial Relations 2018: 2). In relation to homelessness, the NHHA identifies six priority areas:

- women and children affected by family and domestic violence

- children and young people

- Indigenous Australians

- people experiencing repeat homelessness

- people exiting institutions and care into homelessness

- older people (Council on Federal Financial Relations 2018: 17).

The Productivity Commission (2022: 9) explains that the NHHA is a funding mechanism for services rather '*than an agreement for coordinated policy* action'. Therefore, the NHHA enables the transfer of money from the Commonwealth to state and territory governments. Since 2018, the Australian Government has allocated $1.6 billion in funding for the NHHA in the federal budget (Commonwealth of Australia 2022), of which $129 million is allocated towards homelessness services. Although it is indexed to the inflation rate, there have been no increases since its inception.

Under the NHHA, states and territories have entered into bilateral agreements with the Australian Government in return for funding. Under this agreement, federal contributions to homelessness funding are required to be matched by the states and territories. Funding received is allocated based on the 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census homelessness estimates (Council on Federal Financial Relations 2018). These estimates have not been updated since the commencement of the agreement. States and territories are also required to publish housing and homelessness strategies, provide annual statements of assurance and contribute to data development.

The bilateral agreements expire at the end of June 2023; however, a one-year extension of the NHHA to 30 June 2024 is currently being negotiated to support the transition to a new mechanism (Commonwealth of Australia 2022: 51).

1.1.3 Education pathways into the sector

Reflecting both the variety and complexity of the sector, SHS organisations employ people from a range of educational backgrounds. The primary pathway into the sector is through vocational education and training (i.e. TAFE) or a tertiary institution (i.e. university). Another avenue is through lived experience:

> There are not any minimum qualifications required for entry-level employment in the SHS, although most of the workforce hold some qualification. Workers in the SHS come from a range of broader social science and community services backgrounds. There are also a smaller number of people working in the SHS with allied health qualifications and who have a lived experience of homelessness. (CHP 2018: 20)

Community services qualifications from TAFE are recognised by SHS organisations as a primary, entry-level avenue into a career within the sector. The are a range of community services qualification levels – Certificate II, III, IV and a diploma – each of which provide increasingly specialised skills in relation to:

- promoting social, emotional and physical wellbeing

- developing and delivering service programs

- responding to critical situations and coordinating complex case care

- promoting and working with cultural diversity

- managing ethical and legal compliance (Government of Western Australia 2022).

The diploma is highly regarded by SHS employers nationally, as it equips graduates with a range of specialised skills, enabling them to excel both in their early careers and as they progress into managerial and leadership roles.

> In partnership with Homelessness NSW, they've put forward 15 Diploma of Community Services that have not cost us anything … To have this diploma funded is such a great thing. That's going to take me many places in the future. (Interviewee)

To achieve the diploma qualification, up to 52 weeks of study approximating 20 hours per week is required, including at least 100 compulsory hours of work placement (Astute Training 2022). It is during such placements that SHS organisations seek to recruit students who have a demonstrated ability and enthusiasm for working in homelessness service delivery.

> Not only does [hosting student placements] really contribute to our culture and to the continuous improvement of our service, but we were successfully able to recruit from some of our prior placement students. They were already familiar with the service … That's been invaluable because it's a 'try before you buy' situation. (Interviewee)

Tertiary students attending university to attain a Bachelor of Social Work, Youth Work, or related applied social science degree, graduate with skills that are desirable to SHS organisations. Upon conducting a national review of job advertisements within the housing and homelessness services industries, jobseekers with 'degree-level' qualifications were often encouraged to apply. Indeed, while tertiary qualifications were not listed under essential selection criteria (unless the role advertised was a senior managerial position), they were frequently described as favourable for entry-level positions.

Tertiary institutions provide comprehensive programs of community services–related study over three years full-time. Work placements, in which students are required to complete over 400 hours of supervised work with a placement organisation and gain practical experience to complement their theoretical curriculum, comprise a significant component of these courses. Social and youth work are broad disciplines. Such graduates possess the skills to:

- address social inequalities and contribute to developing sustainable communities

- apply a variety of social work practices that are informed by values for social justice, diversity and human rights in an ethical and socially sustainable way

- demonstrate the ability to work both autonomously with initiative and collaboratively in a culturally competent way (Curtin University 2022; Edith Cowan University 2022).

Tertiary courses are structured to enable students to elect complementary areas of study to add breadth to their skillset in accordance with their interests and aptitudes. From an employability perspective, particularly within the SHS sector, such students may benefit from attaining tertiary-level skills in more specialised areas of practice highly relevant to the sector, such as:

- mental health and psychology

- family and child support

- Aboriginal and intercultural studies.

While formal vocational or tertiary education is not a mandatory prerequisite for entry into the SHS sector, candidates possessing these qualifications are attractive to SHS employers and, as such, students are often considered for recruitment either during their compulsory work placements or as graduates. Qualified candidates can offer specialised theoretical knowledge of community services and applied social science and professional experience to entry-level positions, thus strengthening the capabilities of the frontline workforce and creating a pipeline of well-prepared leaders of the sector in the future.

Research in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania offers profiles of current SHS employees. In Victoria and New South Wales, SHS staff were found to be predominantly female (73% and 78%, respectively) (Brackertz and Davison 2021; CHP 2020a; Cortis and Blaxland 2017). The SHS workforce was found to be highly educated, with 60 per cent of staff holding a university qualification in Victoria, and 51 per cent holding a university qualification in New South Wales. A smaller proportion of staff in Tasmania held a degree (11%) (ShelterTAS 2015). In all states, the workforce was considered young enough to not be significantly concerned about ageing (Brackertz and Davison 2021; CHP 2020a; ShelterTAS 2015).

1.2 Why research the SHS sector workforce lifecycle?

Awareness of the challenge of staff retention in the SHS sector is certainly not new, having been observed by Martin, Phillips et al. (2012) a decade ago. These researchers noted the high degree of staff turnover in the sector nationally, both among organisations and within the sector itself, and that the movement of staff had negative financial implications for organisations and a negative impact on service provision.

- The nature of employment contracts has some bearing on this. Research into the New South Wales homelessness workforce found the sector to have a balance between part-time and full-time staff; however, the rate of fixed-term contracts was high when compared with other community service sectors (Cortis and Blaxland 2017). More recently, Brackertz and Davison (2021) found that 73 per cent of the SHS workforce in New South Wales were on permanent ongoing contracts. By contrast, in Victoria and Tasmania, there appeared to be an even mix between permanent and fixed-term contracts, with about half the staff employed on a casual or part-time basis (CHP 2020a; ShelterTAS 2015).

According to CHP (2020b), the issues raised by Martin, Phillips et al. (2012) are yet to be fully resolved. Among the workforce challenges identified for the sector, CHP (2020b: 4–5) highlighted the importance of:

- attracting and retaining people

- developing capability and improving practice

- developing a diverse and healthy workforce

- adopting consistent human resource management practices.

In addition, CHP (2020b) noted the challenges posed by staff retiring at the same time as demand for services increases, along with the general impact of staff turnover to service provision and the sector itself. Past research has attributed these challenges regarding the retention of staff to a range of issues, including:

- a lack of career progression opportunities, such as transitions to managerial positions

- working conditions, such as heavy workloads and inflexible arrangements

- low renumeration

- negative perceptions of the sector by those in community services but outside of the SHS (Cortis and Blaxland 2017: 2–3; Martin, Phillips et al. 2012).

These challenges are not unique to the homelessness services sector. Research shows that recruitment and retention issues are shared by other community service organisations nationally (Considine, O'Sullivan et al. 2020).

More recently, researchers have noted the grim realities faced by employees being unable to achieve desired housing outcomes for clients because of the limited supply of social and affordable housing (Pawson, Clarke et al. 2022). Moreover, despite the importance of greater staff education and training having been recognised for almost a decade (Martin, Phillips et al. 2012), a deficit of appropriately trained workers persists in Australia and overseas (CHP 2019; Isogai 2018; Lawton and Hamilton 2018; Spinney 2018).

While the research reviewed above was targeted towards the SHS sector, at its core, this challenge represents a workforce lifecycle issue rather than a homelessness issue. Therefore, to deliver a better developed and supported SHS sector workforce, this research considers workplace settings with the goal of identifying individual, work, team and organisational factors that contribute to worker outcomes, including performance, wellbeing, retention and development. In this research, we focus on how the design and arrangement of work activities can shape workers' wellbeing and productivity (work design), contextual factors that affect the quality of work motivation (motivation and retention), and the psychological processes involved with successful recruiting and selection of workers (attraction and recruitment). We also consider whether and how these workforce lifecycle issues are exacerbated by external funding structures and factors within the wider housing system, identifying key areas for policy reform.

1.2.1 Work design

The first component of the workforce lifecycle investigated was the work designs within the SHS sector. This component considered what the different roles within the sector involved, what was required of staff, what resources staff were provided with and the experiences of staff with their roles. The term 'work design' describes how work is organised, the activities that staff are expected to carry out, as well as relational and support aspects of jobs. Work design has been found to extensively affect individual worker wellbeing, and is also known to affect worker productivity, effectiveness and organisational loyalty (Humphrey, Nahrgang et al. 2007). Within the SHS sector, workers undertake demanding work that is emotionally intensive, and they are frequently exposed to content or situations that can be traumatising (Lemieux-Cumberlege and Taylor 2019). Taking these factors into account, the research presented here examines work design in the SHS sector to gain a deeper understanding of what jobs 'look like' in the sector for frontline workers. We adopted a specific work design lens, namely the 'SMART' model (Parker, Jorritsma et al. 2022). Based on extensive global research, the SMART model was selected because of its ability to integrate influential parts of a range of work design theories that are useful in understanding how work design within the SHS sector could be developed to better support workers and their wellbeing, as well as build worker capacity.

1.2.2 Motivation and retention

In the second component of the workforce lifecycle, we considered motivation and retention. We adopted the lens of self-determination theory, a major and well-researched model of human motivation (Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This theory proposes that individuals can experience different types of motivation at work, and that these different types of motivation have consequences for employee wellbeing and retention. Lower quality 'controlled' forms of work motivation involve seeking external rewards or avoiding punishment or feelings of shame. Higher quality 'autonomous' work motivation involves people having internalised the value of the work they are doing. Autonomous motivation is associated with higher levels of wellbeing and better performance at work; however, very often, organisational systems and policies, such as incentives or performance management, can (unintentionally) foster controlled motivation (Gagné and Deci 2005; Van den Broeck et al., 2021). Therefore, this project investigates the factors that shape the quality and lasting motivation of homelessness sector workers, explores the ways in which incentive structures and other policies affect worker motivation and retention, and examines the role of policy in improving the quality of worker motivation to maximise retention and wellbeing.

1.2.3 Attraction and recruitment

The final component of the workforce lifecycle investigated here is the attraction of new employees into the sector. While low remuneration has been identified as a barrier to attracting new workers (Cortis and Blaxland 2017), remuneration is far from the only lure available to employers. Indeed, research in applicant attraction has demonstrated that jobseekers also value organisational brand, mission, values and other factors (Lievens and Highhouse 2003), with a key challenge being the effective communication of these and the targeting of such communication at the right market. Accordingly, the research will examine the current strategies for attracting workers to the sector, including the key skills and demographic composition of such workers, and identify opportunities for growth. It will consider the aspects of, and opportunities within, homelessness sector work that can be leveraged to attract more workers, and the skillsets required for good performance in the sector. It will also provide an overview of practices relating to the assessment and selection of job candidates to the sector.

1.2.4 Building and retaining an effective homelessness sector workforce

This project seeks to understand the policy and practice environment required to build and retain an effective homelessness sector workforce. It poses an overarching question:

> **What effective workforce preparation, attraction, recruitment, and sustainment strategies are required to create a better developed and supported specialist homelessness sector workforce?**

The project addresses the following research questions:

- **RQ1 Work design:** What opportunities exist to improve work design within the homelessness sector to benefit the wellbeing and performance of workers?

- **RQ2 Sustaining worker motivation:** What shapes the quality and lasting motivation of homelessness sector workers and how do incentive and performance management structures affect worker motivation and retention?

- **RQ3 Attracting workers:** What are the current strategies for attracting workers to the homelessness sector and where are the opportunities for growth?

- **RQ4 Policy and practice:** What policy and practice changes are needed to create a nationally coordinated approach to sector workforce development that could more efficiently enhance sector capabilities and career pathways across the country?

1.3 Research methods

The research involved a combination of interviews, Investigative Panels, grey literature review and desktop research. The literature review was exclusively focused on workforce issues relating to the homelessness sector and research related to the homelessness sector and the associated policy environment.

1.3.1 Interviews

Interviews with 33 employees from a representative set of SHS agencies across Australia were conducted. Participants were recruited through a snowball methodology that began with personal networks or individuals involved in the Investigative Panel. No spontaneous or unprompted expressions of interest from potential participants were received. Employees interviewed included frontline homelessness sector workers, case managers and line managers of frontline workers. In New South Wales, an organisation invited to participate in an interview advised us that more than one employee would like to be involved and so we opted for a group interview. As a result, we captured the views of more individuals in that state than in the other two states (Table 2). The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and focused on questions regarding work design, motivation and recruitment. All interviews were conducted by members of the research team, audio recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically.

Table 2: Interviews conducted

	Number of interviews completed
Western Australia	8
New South Wales	18
Queensland	7
Total	**33**

Source: Authors.

1.3.2 Investigative Panel

Investigative Panels are designed to leverage the professional expertise and experience of researchers, policy makers and practitioners to consider a specific policy issue and to identify solutions from within and external to the sector.

This series of Investigative Panels captured perspectives on:

- a range of workplace changes that could improve the quality of worker motivation to maximise retention and wellbeing, including education, training, and mentorship at the organisation level

- policy and practice changes that could be adopted to create a nationally coordinated approach to sector workforce development, enabling sector capabilities and career pathways across the country to be enhanced.

The project convened three Investigative Panels with participants from Western Australia (Panel 1), New South Wales and Victoria (Panel 2) and Queensland (Panel 3). The three-hour panels were held online using MS Teams. Facilitated by members of the research team, the panels were conducted as a series of round table discussions. The sessions were recorded and transcribed, and chat logs were also saved. The panels were conducted on the following days/times:

- Western Australia: 7 September 2022, 11am–2pm (AWST)

- New South Wales/Victoria: 20 September 2022, 1:30pm–4:30pm (AEST)

- Queensland: 12 October 2022, 12pm–3pm (AEST)

The panel members were recruited from the research team's networks using a snowball recruitment strategy. Panel members participated under the conditions of anonymity and confidentiality to allow people to speak freely. Therefore, the names of the panel members and the organisations they represented cannot be shared. Panel members included CEOs of SHS organisations, human resource/people & culture team leaders, team members within SHS organisations and representatives of SHS peak or advocacy bodies. SHS organisations from both metropolitan and regional areas were represented, as were the priority areas under the NHHA, including CEOs and team leaders from services specialising in women and children affected by family and domestic violence, youth, Indigenous Australians, people experiencing recurrent periods of homelessness and older people.

During the preparations for the Investigative Panels, it became evident that government representatives involved in the distribution of NHHA funding at the state level would need to be included in the research and, once involved, would be able to offer high-level insights into sector challenges within their states. A decision was made to hold discussions with the government stakeholders separately from the Investigative Panels, using the same questions (Table 3) as the panels. Representatives from the Queensland department that delivers housing and homelessness services and funding were approached to be involved in the research, but the invitation was declined.

Prior to the Investigative Panels, members were provided with a Discussion Paper that included the terms of reference, findings from the interviews and literature review, a background to the organisational psychology approach being applied and the topics on which the discussion would focus.

Table 3: Panel participants and additional interviews

State	Panel details	Number of participants
Western Australia	7 September 2022, 11am–2pm (AWST)	12
New South Wales/Victoria	20 September 2022, 1:30pm–4:30pm (AEST)	10
Queensland	12 October 2022, 12pm–3pm (AEST)	8
Total		**30**
Interviews with state government representatives using panel questions		
Western Australia		2
New South Wales		2
Total	**4**	**4**

Source: Authors.

Terms of reference

The terms of reference and remit were determined by the overall goals of the research, which were determined at the time of writing the proposal that was approved for funding.

The terms of reference for the Investigative Panels included:

- The development of a robust understanding of the status of sector workforce capability.
- The identification of:
  - work characteristics contributing to negative employee outcomes (e.g. burnout, turnover, poor performance and wellbeing)
  - factors that shape the quality and lasting motivation of employees (e.g. incentive and performance management structures)
  - current strategies for attracting workers to the sector and the criteria for assessing candidates for jobs in the sector and making selection decisions
  - changes that can improve the quality of work design, worker motivation and better targeted recruiting to maximise retention and wellbeing.
- The need for more research into:
  - what is needed under the new NHHA to enhance the homelessness sector
  - whether a nationally coordinated approach could benefit and support the homelessness sector workforce
  - how the sector's workforce capability could be measured/monitored into the future.

Within these terms of reference, Investigative Panel members were invited to speak about any relevant topic, while prompts informed by a predetermined set of questions were provided. This approach allowed for a free-flowing conversation. After the discussions, the content of the interviews and panel transcripts were coded against the research questions. Within each broad research question/major theme, the text was then further analysed to draw out common themes related to major workforce challenges, how these were being addressed at an individual or organisational level, and panellists' or interviewees' aspirations for change. While transcripts were initially analysed separately by state, the analysis quickly revealed significant commonalities in themes across jurisdictions. Attention was paid to the operating areas of SHSs within each state, and where key differences were apparent between services covering metropolitan areas and large regional centres versus those servicing remote areas.

2. Specialist homelessness services workforce strategies

- **Peak bodies and other organisations in at least three states have undertaken extensive work to develop dedicated workforce strategies for the SHS sector.**

- **These strategies provide opportunities to improve the sustainability of the SHS sector workforce, along with workforce capability frameworks by focusing on organisational-level change.**

- **The context of these strategies was to improve the efficiency of the workforce relative to the available funding rather than examine funding models as potential causes of workforce issues.**

There is considerable evidence that the SHS sector is either aware of, or building a stronger awareness of, its workforce issues. Indeed, the 2008 Homelessness Taskforce report, *The road home: a national approach to reducing homelessness*, explicitly identified the need to ensure that the homelessness services sector developed and retained a highly skilled and capable workforce. That report highlighted that the SHS workforce faced difficulties in progressing careers, received relatively low wages, experienced high levels of workplace stress and employee turnover, and was comprised of an ageing worker population that faced insecure working arrangements. Nearly 15 years later, as we discovered in our own research and in the research of others, many of these issues remain.

A high-level review of literature published by housing and homelessness peak bodies, academic institutions and state government departments since *The road home*'s release identified several documents that raised workforce issues, including some that were entirely dedicated to the topic of building a better workforce strategy for the SHS sector. There was considerable variation between Australian states in terms of the sophistication of these strategies; below, we provide a summary of the differences and review some of the key insights from the more developed ones. We found that Victoria, New South Wales and Tasmania appeared to have developed, or were in the process of developing, dedicated SHS workforce strategies. Below, we review and summarise the workforce strategies from these three states.

2.1 Victoria

In Victoria, considerable work has been undertaken or commissioned by the Council to Homeless Persons to develop a workforce strategy (CHP 2018). We commence with a review of this work, as the outputs and proposed actions are highly sophisticated and many are in line with best practice.

CHP's *Specialist homelessness sector transition plan (2018–2022)* (hereafter *Transition plan*) was launched in response to the 10-Year Community Services Industry Plan for social services in Victoria (Victorian Council of Social Service 2022). Based on extensive consultations with stakeholders from the SHS and state and federal governments, as well as a comprehensive literature review, it aimed to contribute to the goal of identifying ways to improve service delivery and outcomes in the context of rapid change, increasing housing costs, and the growing demand for, and complexity of, SHS. The *Transition plan* identified 15 key goals, five of which were dedicated to workforce capacity building:

1. build an SHS workforce development strategy

2. develop workforce pathways

3. develop an SHS workforce capability framework

4. provide training and development to the SHS

5. share and use data to inform SHS practice.

In the *Transition plan*, the SHS workforce was described as (broadly) falling into three categories: initial assessment and planning/triage, providing ongoing support to access housing and tenancy management. This broad typology is referenced in later documents published by CHP.

The document noted that entry-level roles did not require qualifications, though many members of the workforce did hold some qualifications, with workers typically coming from social science or community service backgrounds. Others held allied health qualifications or had lived experiences with homelessness (Spinney 2013).

Following the publication of the *Transition plan*, CHP (2019) published the *Specialist homelessness sector workforce capability framework* (hereafter *SHSWCF*), fulfilling the third goal in the list above (note: goal 13 in the full list). The *SHSWCF* aimed to provide some consistency across the community service sector regarding how workforce capabilities were understood and operationalised. It focused on the three types of SHS roles identified in the *Transition plan*, and captured work undertaken by those responsible for direct service provision to team leaders to advanced practitioners (note: middle and senior managerial roles are not covered by the framework). The *SHSWCF* drew on the *Community housing workforce capability framework* (Community Housing Industry Association Victoria 2019) in relation to roles involving tenancy management, and the *Responding to family violence capability framework* (Victorian Government 2017b) for workers in core support services or intervention agencies.

Workforce capability frameworks can be very useful tools, providing clear and unified language to support human resource functions. These are articulated in the *SHSWCF* (CHP 2019) as follows:

• attracting new staff by clarifying the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics required for each SHS role

• clarifying the expectations around key behaviours and outcomes of workers in the SHS

• helping workers identify skills and professional development needs and career pathways

• providing a basis for performance planning and reviews

• providing a clear lens through which to capture the capability of an individual, team or organisation to enable workforce planning

• providing a basis for a common understanding across the sector regarding best practices.

The *SHSWCF* describes five competency domains, with 17 nested supporting capabilities (two to six per domain) and three proficiency levels (foundational, emergent and leading). In the report, each domain is introduced and its presence within the framework justified. The supporting capabilities are then defined, with the three levels of proficiency explained in terms of clear behaviours. A full discussion or reproduction of the content of the framework falls beyond the scope of this review; however, it is the opinion of the research team that the development of such a framework provides an important foundation for examining and addressing workforce issues within the SHS.

Following the publication of the *SHSWCF*, CHP (2020a) published the *Specialist homelessness sector workforce development strategy 2020–2025* (hereafter *SHSWDS*), fulfilling the first goal in the *Transition plan* outlined above (note: goal 11 in the full list). The *SHSWDS* provided a profile of the workforce based on information from the *Census of workforces that intersect with family violence 2017 report* (Victorian Government 2017a) and identified several key risks, namely that a significant proportion of workers would likely leave the sector to retire, that turnover rates appeared to be high, that there were significant costs to replacing and training leaving staff, and that it was unclear how attractive casual or part-time work arrangements were to the SHS workforce. Of note, the report highlighted the need for reliable data about the SHS workforce, including staff numbers, length of employment, pay scales, qualifications, backgrounds, levels of staff satisfaction, turnover intentions and types of staff support required.

The *SHSWDS* (CHP 2020a) noted that the ability to attract staff with relevant qualifications, skills and experience was a major challenge for the sector, especially for smaller organisations. The sector competes with other community sectors that potential workers are more familiar with and that can pay higher rates. Two major pipelines for new staff included field placement students, though supervision and administrivia could be onerous, and people with lived experience with homelessness, though these individuals could sometimes be vulnerable in certain situations. However, the authors noted that, absent data, these assumptions would remain untested.

With respect to capability, the *SHSWDS* (CHP 2020a) argued that there was a lack of sufficient content in VET and higher education training programs to provide graduates with the knowledge and skills they needed to be 'job ready' in the SHS context. The report also identified several work design issues that pose major challenges to staff attraction and retention. In particular, it was noted that staff often work with clients that are grappling with complex and comorbid situations (e.g. rough sleeping, family violence, misuse of alcohol and other drugs, mental health issues) without sufficient training or experience, and that they encounter difficulties in performing their roles due to the lack of affordable housing stock.

Notwithstanding the absence of data, the *SHSWDS* (CHP 2020a) highlighted the need for a diverse workforce that could better represent its client demographic. It called for the involvement of more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; more men; more younger people; more cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity; and more LGBTIQA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and other identities) people. Additionally, it noted that organisations based in regional areas faced major challenges in attracting and retaining staff.

The *SHSWDS* (CHP 2020a) identified five goals, which described desired end states:

1. talented people are attracted to the sector and stay in the sector
2. people have the capabilities to work effectively and opportunities to enhance their practice
3. there is a sound knowledge base about our workforce
4. our workforce is connected healthy, diverse and thriving
5. there is an established architecture for workforce development.

Nested within each goal were sets of strategies that described narrower, aspiring end states. Full reproduction of these strategies is beyond the scope of this document; however, many similar themes also emerged from the interviews and Investigative Panel discussions from this project. Here, we summarise several noteworthy themes:

- Training opportunities are highly desirable; however, the lack of time and the costs pose major barriers to accessing training in practice.

- Supportive supervision is critical in an environment in which the work can be extremely stressful due to clients facing a range of complex issues, and where there is insufficient housing. The CHP called for a model of professional supervision to be developed.

- Higher education providers do not have any formal requirement to include specific relevant content. Accreditation is often awarded in relation to AQF or TEQSA standards.

- Within VET, none of the formally recognised qualifications were developed specifically for the SHS.

- Many SHS organisations struggle to attract applicants of sufficient quality. Suggestions to improve recruitment included improving the sector's 'brand awareness' (e.g. through better representativeness during training), better clarifying and highlighting career opportunities, promoting the transferability of skills, and clarifying the tangible and intangible benefits of the sector. 'Values fit' was identified as a key challenge when assessing candidates for suitability.

- Field placement students require significant investment of time and supervision in the context of an already overworked sector. Placeright was suggested as a free online system that is used in other sectors to provide administrative infrastructure for field placement students.

- Workers with lived experience were identified as a growth opportunity. Such individuals could provide useful new perspectives, but it was noted that they may require additional peer support.

- Providing leadership and management development may improve retention and promote leadership in the sector. The CHP noted the success of their oversubscribed 'Women Working Wonders' leadership program.

- Improving the diversity of the SHS workforce would both provide better representation of its clients while also expanding beyond the 'traditional' pool of workers.

- Regional SHS organisations face similar issues to metropolitan ones, but often these are greater in scope or intensity.

- SHS organisations do not collect or share data on their organisational culture, staff satisfaction, turnover intentions, wellbeing etc., making it difficult to quantify the extent of workforce issues or identify trends over time.

The *SHSWDS* report concluded with concrete actions and deliverables to fulfil its five goals.

2.2 New South Wales

We identified two documents that described SHS workforce strategies in New South Wales. The first was Homelessness NSW and Domestic Violence NSW et al.'s (2017) *NSW homelessness industry and workforce development strategy 2017–2020* (hereafter *NSWIWDS*) This document describes a workforce strategy that flowed from the work of a sector development project that was a collaboration between three peak bodies: Homelessness NSW, Domestic Violence NSW and Yfoundations. The *NSWIWDS* was informed by a combination of desktop research and stakeholder consultations, including reference groups, government bodies, partner organisations and government agencies. Four goals were identified (Homelessness NSW, Domestic Violence NSW et al. 2017: 5):

1. to equip services to engage in continuous quality improvements and good practice, within a trauma informed framework

2. to provide avenues for effective service integration through networking, collaboration and coordination

3. to support services and staff to demonstrate service delivery outcomes, using agreed indicators and measurement tools

4. to apply an integrated learning and development framework to make systemic improvements in workforce capability, and promote career pathways within and outside the industry.

The nature of these goals was quite different from the Victorian workforce strategy in that the focus was on improving service delivery, with investment in the workforce being a means to that end (rather than workforce outcomes such as lowering turnover and improving recruitment). Accordingly, the activities nested within goals 1–3 included the implementation of quality standards (and auditing), promoting knowledge sharing (e.g. conferences and communities of practice), designing and sharing data collection tools (e.g. health checks and client satisfaction surveys) and developing key performance indicators.

Goal 4 was focused more directly on the workers within the SHS. The *NSWIWDS* noted that working conditions in the sector had deteriorated and career advancement opportunities were limited. Citing a report by Cortis and Blaxland (2017), the *NSWIWDS* identified a shift towards fractional working arrangements and noted that high numbers of workers had reported their intention to leave the sector. The report described the development of a capability framework and staff exchange program, and proposed the addition of a senior practitioner role to SHS organisations. The incumbent would be expected to provide expertise and support to employees, and support the recruitment and training of staff. Such a role would represent a potential step for career advancement. The *NSWIWDS* document also provided a summary of the training priorities for client-facing and managerial staff and a set of principles to guide the delivery of and access to training. Finally, in response to Goal 4, the report proposed that an awards/recognition plan be implemented across the sector (Brackertz and Davison 2021).

Following the publication of the *NSWIWDS*, Homelessness NSW (2018), in conjunction with Domestic Violence NSW and Yfoundations, published the *NSW specialist homelessness services workforce capability framework*, the aims of which were similar to the framework published by CHP in Victoria. However, the authors noted additional benefits including the facilitation of sector-wide capability transferability and cross-organisational collaboration. The authors also provided advice to organisations wishing to adopt or adapt the framework.

The NSW framework identified nine 'streams', with 'specialist streams' nested within them, and four tiers (ranging from practitioners to senior leadership) reflecting the degree of autonomy and decision-making required for each role. Advice was provided with respect to how the capability framework could be adopted for various employee and human resource functions (e.g. evaluating current performance, designing selection criteria, working for a promotion). The framework also identified eight personal attributes and provided several case studies. Altogether, the document provides a complete tool kit for any SHS organisation wishing to adopt the capability framework.

The research team is aware of a forthcoming New South Wales homelessness industry and workforce development strategy that has been delayed due to COVID-19 (Brackertz and Davison 2021).

2.3 Tasmania

In 2015, Shelter Tasmania published its *Specialist homelessness services workforce development strategy* (ShelterTAS 2015). The document was prepared in response to the Homelessness National Partnership Implementation Plan for Tasmania, July 2009 to June 2013. A major focus of the strategy was on the skills and training needs of the homelessness sector workforce in the state. In Stage 1, the project aimed to identify the sector's training needs, the barriers to training faced by SHS organisations and the workforce priorities to ensure services are improved. Stage 2 of the project involved taking action to address skill development, access to training and professional development, promote information sharing, and build a training and development funding model.

The report noted research findings that showed that many SHS workers were highly skilled, but that their skills do not necessarily match the sector's demands. Accordingly, greater investment into developing sector-specific skills was required. The report recognised the need to ensure that any skill development must be compatible with the work structures and resources of SHS organisations. While a significant focus of this workforce strategy was on training and development, it also recognised the need to consider other issues, including the attraction of workers and the improvement of wages to better reflect the skills required to perform in the role.

With respect to strategic outcomes, the ShelterTAS (2015) report identified four key priorities:

1. increasing the skills and competencies of the SHS workforce

2. increasing the accessibility of training and professional development to the whole of the sector

3. developing an information sharing network

4. building a future training and professional development funding model.

Interestingly, the priorities above did not directly seek to address workforce issues such as recruitment, work design, engagement and retention. Indeed, through a combination of telephone interviews and stakeholder meetings, the authors discovered that several trends evident in other states were less evident in Tasmania. For example, the authors discovered that an ageing workforce and staff turnover were less problematic to SHS organisations in Tasmania (compared to other states), and that the flexibility afforded through casualisation of the workforce was regarded as attractive to potential employees.

2.4 Summary

The workforce strategies produced in Victoria and New South Wales identified many of the workforce sustainability issues that are discussed later in this report. Both strategies identified a set of clear objectives that aim to alleviate workforce issues, along with a supporting capability framework and concrete strategies. The Tasmanian workforce strategy was developed before the COVID-19 pandemic and was mostly focused on the training and development needs of the SHS sector workforce. For other states and territories, discussions about the SHS workforce appeared to be nested within wider discussions about the community sector workforce, or the allied health and social assistance workforces. Typically, such literature does not provide much detail about workforce issues that are specific to the SHS sector or strategies to manage these issues; however, it appears that many of the trends and challenges faced by the wider community services sectors are similar in nature.

The workforce strategies discussed in this section were produced to provide opportunities to improve the sustainability of the SHS sector workforce, along with workforce capability frameworks that focus on organisational-level change. Importantly, these strategies aimed to improve the efficiency of the workforce relative to available funding. As a result, they did not focus on funding models in their respective jurisdictions as potential causes of workforce issues.

3. Work design factors

- **Workers in the SHS sector experience complex work design. Significant variation in their day-to-day work responding to complex client needs creates variety, but also makes the work highly challenging and work planning unpredictable.**

- **Workers experience very high workloads and emotional demands, including potential exposure to vicarious trauma, often without the opportunity for psychological detachment. This elevates the risk of workers experiencing burnout and psychological distress.**

- **Underfunding and understaffing (both in terms of numbers and required skills) relative to service demand means that organisations face difficulties setting parameters around work and being able to design for work in a way that supports staff wellbeing.**

- **There is an opportunity to increase resources for workers to balance the significant demands placed on them. This may include increasing relational resources; providing opportunities for growth, training and career progression; and empowering staff to adjust their roles through job crafting.**

This chapter focuses on the work that staff in the SHS sector undertake, the factors that influence the design of their work and the opportunities available to better support them through work design. Work design is the 'content and organization of one's work tasks, activities, relationships, and responsibilities' (Parker 2014: 662). It has very important implications for employee, group and organisational outcomes. The dominant approach to the study of work design is the 'job characteristics model' (Hackman and Oldham 1976), which describes work design in terms of five characteristics: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback. In combination, these features determine the levels of perceived meaningfulness of one's work, sense of personal responsibility for one's work and knowledge of the results of one's work, which in turn determine work outcomes. Building on this model, researchers in organisational psychology have identified key psychological and social job characteristics that influence the design of jobs and constitute well-designed work (Parker, Morgeson et al. 2017).

The 'SMART' model of good work design developed by Sharon Parker at the Centre for Transformative Work Design (CTWD 2022) brings together key knowledge in this area, synthesising it into a simple framework. The components of the SMART model purport that well-designed work is 'stimulating', provides opportunities for 'mastery', 'agency' and 'relational' aspects, and has 'tolerable' demands.

Good and SMART work design has been shown to have important positive outcomes for employees and organisations. Well-designed work can prevent harm from occurring by minimising or eliminating physical or psychological risks (Burton and World Health Organization 2010), as well as enhancing wellbeing and reducing instances of poor mental health (Parker, Jorritsma et al. 2022). Good work design has also been linked with employees being more committed to their organisations, becoming more creative and innovative in their work, being more engaged in their work and workplaces, and increasing worker performance (Parker 2014). Increases in productivity, which can be mutually beneficial for both the organisation and the recipients of services, can also occur when work is designed well (Knight and Parker 2019).

Without a high-quality work design, efforts to attract, train and retain new workers in the homelessness sector may face considerable barriers. There is scope for the work design of typical roles within the homelessness support sector to be investigated with a view to understanding how these job characteristics contribute to negative worker outcomes (e.g. burnout, high turnover, poor performance). Identifying ways to improve the work design of the SHS workforce will not only enhance worker wellbeing and performance but also better inform the role of policy in supporting and promoting these improvements.

In examining the work design of the SHS workforce, it is important to consider the organisational and occupational context (Morgeson, Dierdorff et al. 2010), as this can act as an antecedent to work design at an organisational level. Context can also influence the emergence of particular work designs (Johns 2018). Organisational and occupational context affects and influences work design, including job demands and resources (Johns 2018; Parker, Van den Broeck et al. 2016).

The remainder of this chapter explores elements of work and experiences across the SHS sector utilising the SMART work design lens. It examines the impact of these elements for workers and identifies potential opportunities for supporting the wellbeing and performance of workers.

3.1 Complexity of work design in the SHS sector

Work design in the SHS sector is complex and diverse. Workers perform roles that require them to have wide ranging skills as well as the ability to cope with high levels of stress and confronting situations. The nature of work in the SHS sector and its impact on staff has been previously explored (Lemieux-Cumberlege and Taylor 2019). However, the overall design of SHS services has been seldom considered. As discussions with the panellists and interviewees revealed, there are reasons why work design has been difficult to consider and apply in SHS settings. This is partly because the complexity of the work extends beyond seeking to connect people with housing. As one panellist put it: '*If working in this sector was just homelessness, my job would be quite easy*' (Panel member, Panel 1).

Panellists and interviewees noted that there is no standard work design across the SHS sector, even for roles that, on paper, may look the same or appear to have the same goals:

> The job design is different for everyone; it could be the same role funded in the same way under the same state government funding package, but the job is designed in a different way, and it is done in a different way. In the bigger organisations, there might be multiple teams of case management workers that are funded by the same program but split up into separate teams because of the number of workers –and even within those workers, the job is designed differently … It was difficult to see what my job was looking at the funding agreement. I knew what the outcomes were, but not what my job was. Line managers know that they run a team of homelessness case managers and the aim is to get these clients housed. But what does that look like? And so, the job design of getting from A to B, from unhoused to housed or unsupported to supported, whatever it is, is different all over the place. There aren't specific guidelines on how the job gets done. (Panel member, Panel 2)

Other panellists described day-to-day work in the sector as being relatively unknown and misunderstood by those providing funding:

> When talking about work design, I would like to take a different approach and not just, 'how we can put out fires', but how we can stop the fire to start with. That is about having some understanding about what reality looks like in the sector … The complexities of clients and the No Wrong Door approach is adding more pressure to work design. I think the sector needs to reset [to understand] realistically what our services should look like. (Panel member, Panel 2)

To examine the complex work design attributes of the SHS sector across a range of worker experiences, each aspect of the SMART model is considered below.

3.1.1 Stimulating

Stimulating jobs are those that involve a high degree of mental complexity and variety, and provide the opportunity to use a range of skills, engage in a variety of tasks and think outside the box (CTWD 2022). Most SHS roles are highly stimulating, as the day-to-day work is inevitably different, with a broad range of needs to be met.

> I have worked at three homeless shelters, and they had a disclaimer that we need to 'help the service needs as required' – which opens it up to be very broad and ambiguous. (Interviewee)

While highly interesting and engaging work is usually a beneficial antecedent for good work design, when work becomes too diverse and unpredictable, it can be subject to the 'too-much-of-a-good-thing effect' (TMGT effect) (Pierce and Aguinis 2011). This is when antecedents that are usually expected to be beneficial are taken too far, resulting in negative outcomes. Workers in the SHS sector experience a complex work design in their roles, as they work across multiple areas and need to respond to a range of scenarios, as well as undertake a host of different tasks depending on the day (from sourcing housing and connecting to support services, to assisting clients to clean toilets). Discussion concerning the changeable nature of the job for frontline workers specifically identified the need to work within a crisis framework.

> We work in a crisis framework that's very intensive. It's not just one area that we work in, we cross over many areas to offer the client support. (Interviewee)

> On a typical day, you start at 6 am. At an engagement hub you might see 120 people between 7 in the morning and midday who are all currently rough sleeping or homeless, all in a crisis. You're dealing with that every single day –– and then you've got fights and overdosing –you're constantly dealing with crisis and stress. And then you either go to university in the afternoon or home to your family. It's constant, and I don't think it is talked about enough. (Panel member, Panel 1)

Participants identified that, in some SHS roles, the level of stimulating work may be too great and, as such, may be contributing to the risk of negative outcomes, such as burnout and fatigue, as well as workers feeling overwhelmed and under supported. Participants also noted that there was a difference between stimulating work and the additional stressors that were unique to working with people in crisis (e.g. as described in the quotation above: aggression, violence, drug overdose). Nevertheless, some workers were able to find a balance, enabling them to experience the benefits of diverse work, such as feeling motivated and not getting bogged down in repetitive tasks.

> The motivation is there – you're in the community, you're seeing [the need to support people] all the time, so you want to do what you can do to help. Even though it can wear you down and it can get hard because you are doing such a diverse range of things, it's easy to get motivated with the work … You're doing something different each day. So, it is the variety of tasks you do with the different types of people that make it easier to come in and do what you can. (Interviewee)

> The variety of tasks … You might have a certain number of clients with vastly different needs. So, you're always doing something different with each client … Everyone's unique – you don't get bogged down doing the same thing. (Interviewee)

Overall, workers within the SHS sector experience high levels of stimulating work with significant variation in their day-to-day activities depending on client presentations and needs. While this is ordinarily considered to be a beneficial work characteristic, it appears that it may be too much variation and uncertainty for many workers in the sector, potentially driving some of the negative outcomes observed in the workforce (Lemieux-Cumberlege and Taylor 2019).

3.1.2 Mastery

Work that promotes a sense of mastery provides individuals with a sense of clarity in their role and feedback on their performance; such workers demonstrate understanding and competence in their role and have the confidence to complete a piece of work from beginning to end (CTWD 2022). In this context, participants felt that the fundamental lack of housing availability was crucial (Gurran, Rowley et al. 2018). For workers in the homelessness sector, the primary aim was to support people to find housing; therefore, the lack of available and appropriate affordable housing impacted workers sense of mastery in their roles. To put this another way, the limitations on housing availability affected workers' ability to master their roles, leaving them with a sense of failure. As one interviewee put it: '*How do we do our jobs when there are no houses?*'

Participants' discussions revealed that workers in the SHS sector are required to be skilled in areas not always covered in tertiary training, and to have a broad understanding of political and social landscapes, systems and policies.

> One of the most challenging aspects of the role, when we talk about job design, is that there are complex issues in delivering a service on the frontline … Substance abuse, mental health, struggle, domestic violence. One of the challenges we have is incorporating all these social elements into a job description to attract the right people who have vast experience and are wanting to work in all these different fields. It's not just one field. (Panel member, Panel 1)

> A staff member starts their shift and part of their role is to go out to the streets and look out for people who are homeless … Then, when they're confronted with a situation, they've got to be able to quickly look at how they can link the person [to support resources] … They have got to have full knowledge about all the resources. (Panel member, Panel 1)

Investigative Panel members and interviewees identified a broad range of knowledge and skills that SHS staff required to be competent in their roles. They also discussed ways in which SHS staff could be supported to upskill and to work with clients they were confident to work with. One panellist described how introducing a new structure in their organisation helped incentivise workers to stay and seemingly enabled them to experience a greater sense of mastery in their roles:

> We had to restructure and implement different levels within the organisation so that instead of having [more] support workers introduced, a senior support worker would take on more specialised roles. [Staff] then progress to delivery later, working their way up to portfolio manager. So, we identified that to retain staff there needed to be incentives for those who wanted to stay in the organisation and grow and progress. We all know that no-one does this work because of money. We do it because we love the work. We don't want to lose people. (Panel member, Panel 2)

Similarly, another participant commented that:

> Although professional development budgets are non-existent in this sector, there's a lot of free training and we take advantage of that, we learn from others in the sector, and others in various roles. (Interviewee)

Boundaries and disconnections between services were identified as contributing to difficulties in being able to confidently and competently complete work requirements, resulting in the feeling of '*not being able to help people*'. This disconnect or lack of collaboration between services was identified as decreasing workers' sense of mastery:

> Until we can deal with that, we're still going to have the frustration – the sense of we can't help people, we don't have the support of other services. Everybody has created their own boundaries. So now we can't access these services. And so, we're pretty much on our own out there and you know just can't access homeless services. (Panel member, Panel 1)

Workers in the SHS sector undertake training and upskilling, where available, while also learning from experience and through supervision to gain the necessary knowledge to complete all aspects of the job.

3.1.3 Agency

The level of agency workers have is related to autonomy and decision-making: for example, whether they can devise their own work schedule and process for completing their work (CTWD 2022; Hay, Klonek et al. 2020). Working independently, having significant freedom and choice around daily tasks and having the ability to implement possible strategies or directions with clients suggests a work design that is very high in agency. Workers in the SHS sector described significant agency and autonomy in their work, as it was common to work in a way that was self-directed within the limits of organisational policies and procedures. It was identified that workers were expected to be largely autonomous and to have the knowledge and skills to do their job.

> We are given a set amount of brokerage for my team and how I allocate that is almost entirely up to me. If it's a big decision I might consult my team leader or my cluster leader for advice. But they do trust that I'm going to make the right decision … With daily tasks, it is up to the person completing that task as to how they want to do it. (Interviewee)

> We have procedures to follow, so provided you work within those boundaries, you're relatively free. (Interviewee)

> I've got a lot of independence as to whether I'm going to sit in the office and do office space duties, or if I'm going to go out and see someone – and that goes for the team as well. (Interviewee)

According to SHS workers, the high level of agency in their work provided space for innovation and creativity, and they both appreciated and relished the opportunity to think outside the box. The freedom and choice to be adaptable and create new ways to support vulnerable people through their work was rewarding and meaningful for staff.

> The creativity has been fun for me. You've got to have fun built into your work, I think that's what makes a difference. (Panel Member, Panel 2)

> I've got a huge freedom to be creative with my ideas for programs for the community in the community that my family comes from. (Interviewee)

While freedom and choice were meaningful for workers, they came with an intensity that could be difficult to maintain. Therefore, empowering staff to take time off as needed or to blend their work with other activities such as study was considered important. Such flexibility would enable workers to create more balance and reduce likelihood of burnout.

> The intensity of this work doesn't lend itself to [full-time]. The potential to burnout is more elevated in my team members who are working five days a week front-facing. So, if there is an opportunity to diversify the rule a little bit … [For example] what's working well for some team members is to have part-days off or rostered days off, or they're doing a mix of study and working. I find that a much more realistic work–life balance for this type of work. (Interviewee)

Providing opportunities for staff to create their own work–life balance is central to job crafting (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001). Job crafting is self-initiated change that an employee makes to align their jobs with their own preferences, motives and passions, balancing the demands and resources of the job to optimise their experience at work.

While autonomy and choice at work are important and can lead to positive outcomes, excessive autonomy and choice can result in uncertainty and ambiguity, aggravate burnout and potentially lead to questionable decision-making (Lu, Brockner et al. 2017; Zhou 2020), in essence demonstrating the TMGT effect (Pierce and Aguinis 2011). The antidote to this effect is not restricting autonomy, but, rather, providing more relational resources, such as co-worker social support (debriefing), working collaboratively and access to supervision (peer, manager, clinical) (Knight and Parker 2019).

3.1.4 Relational

The relational aspects of work include the extent to which workers experience social support (from supervisors and colleagues), a sense of purpose in relation to the lives of others and society more broadly, and the sense that their work is appreciated. The opportunity for mutual emotional and social support from staff and team members is important for workers in buffering stress and finding meaning from their work (CTWD 2022). While the context within which this project was undertaken has seen many changes (such as working from home arrangements) and disruptions to relational aspects of work due to COVID-19, the type of work that people in the SHS sector do requires interactions between employees and clients and these interactions cannot be administered remotely. The issues with relational aspects of work design for SHS workers are unlikely to be attributable to working from home arrangements. Indeed, during our interviews and focus groups there were no references to, or mentions of, working from home, at least not with respect to frontline workers. During the pandemic lockdowns and after, workers in the SHS sector continued to work in roles that were significantly relational in nature. At times, these relational aspects presented further demands on workers.

> There are multiple levels of pressure on staff: There is pressure on staff from the clients they are supporting because people are so desperate, they've got nowhere else to go and they've built a peer relationship because our work is very relational. They see the worker as being able to provide them with [resources] to meet their needs, so there's tremendous pressure from that side. There is pressure from the workers themselves because of their value system; the type of people we are recruiting into the sector are naturally empathetic and wanting good outcomes for their clients. They place tremendous pressure on themselves in a very frustrating environment where they are constantly met with barriers and systemic challenges. (Panel member, Panel 1)

Of course, many other changes apart from COVID-19 have occurred in the last decade or so, and it's probably impossible to identify anything as the cause of workforce issues specifically in the homelessness sector, as opposed to workforce issues generally. In some respects, it was quite distressing to discover that these issues had been highlighted so long ago, and that the proposed interventions, such as the work in Victoria and New South Wales that we reviewed above, have neither resolved the problems nor significantly changed the conversations. However, to be fair to the drivers of that work, much of it was undertaken either not long before or during the COVID-19 pandemic when other factors were at play, and we are optimistic that it will begin positively influencing outcomes in the next five years.

Understanding that the relational aspects of work are about more than contact with other people (e.g. contact with clients), participants discussed how social resources could be made available for their staff while undertaking their meaningful work. Relationality, such as team dynamics and providing supervision, was identified by participants as being not only important in balancing the demands of the work but also in ensuring the delivery of services and supporting workers wellbeing and performance.

> One of the key things in workforce development over my career has been forming a team with all the right players at the right time in subgroups. If I use the analogy of AFL, it's like having a backline, midline, and a forward line, knowing who's on the ball, and everybody knowing the plan. When someone is injured, we have backup. Now, this is one of the critical issues in the workforce: there aren't layers of backup, so it places pressure on injured players to keep playing. That's not good for the wellbeing of the industry. That leads to people getting exhausted quickly, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and secondary vicarious trauma. And that links back to supervision. You need to have good peer supervision, good line management supervision, and good clinical supervision. (Panel member, Panel 1)

Further to formal relational resources, the relationships between co-workers were identified as important for increasing enjoyment and offering opportunities to debrief. This aligns with the buffering hypothesis (Cohen and Wills 1985) in which social support can buffer stress and demands.

> To make that easier, we need to be connected and we need to look out for each other. If you're out on the road every day dealing with tough clients, it's amazing to come back to the office an hour or two before the end of your shift. We can debrief and chat about what's happened and [reflect], 'did I deal with that properly', or 'what would you have done?' We all bounce ideas off each other. (Interviewee)

> I love coming to work, everyone is like a friend here … We host weekly drinks at our café next door to catch up with everyone. We celebrate birthdays, have fortnightly breakfasts, and we debrief every day. [There's a] great sense of community here. It's a hard job [but] to make it easier, we need to connect with each other. (Interviewee)

> [I] try to use those structured work meetings to allow the individual personalities to contribute and to choose settings which are different or fun – they don't cost anything, but it's an iterative, consultative, continuously improving, messy jumble. But it is working. So, I'm going to run with that. (Interviewee)

We found that, where organisations and management increased opportunities for relational aspects – for staff to connect with each other – staff were better able to manage their work and the overall work culture improved.

3.1.5 Tolerable demands

Finally, the demands of work are important to consider, especially the extent to which a job involves manageable levels of work, such as time pressure, workload and emotional demands. Inconsistencies in feedback, instructions or responsibilities are also important to consider as they can limit staff in being able to meet the demands of their work (Hay, Klonek et al. 2020). The job demands–resources model (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Demerouti, Bakker et al. 2001) identifies work conditions in two broad categories: demands and resources. It aims to promote balance, alleviating the pressure of job demands via the availability of job resources, thereby mitigating the risk of workers experiencing psychological distress and burnout.

From discussions with members of the Investigative Panels as well as individual interviewees, it is clear that work demands in the sector are high. SHS workers experience heavy workloads, including increased administrative tasks; taxing emotional demands; (potentially) unrealistic expectations based on (outdated) key performance indices; and significant problem-solving demands, including having to navigate systems that are outside of their control.

> We know we're in a housing crisis, as we all are aware of that, and there's not enough staff in a lot of organisations, and from the work that I was doing in the project, there were a lot of organisations that were talking about the high turnover and that you've got less staff, you've got less opportunity to be engaging and collaborating with other services and different domains because you still need to do your business as usual and business as usual is increasing because of the amount of people that are coming through the front door. (Panel member, Panel 3)

> The big thing from a work design [perspective] is going back to the way we're contracted. Targets and KPI's come before stories and nurture. We have high targets to meet. So, the staff have this burden that everything's going to be rushed: 'I have to hit this almost impossible number otherwise [the service] won't get funded'. Alongside that, there's been a massive increase in the amount of administration and high-level organisational structures in place. Our risk management and financial management has always been high, but the risk management and the accreditations is next level, and staff feel the burden. (Panel member, Panel 2)

Further, participants observed that the demand for services in the sector far exceeded most organisations' targets, putting additional pressure on staff and services to turn over clients quickly. This quick turnover could be at odds with best practice or what was considered best for clients' care needs.

> We're meant to house 45 young people a year, but we have five beds, and young people are meant to stay for 12 weeks. So, how can we possibly house 45 young people if we give each young person the time they deserve and the time that is required? We've changed the expectation that all our outreach workers would have a case load of 20. We've dropped that to 12 because we are trying to work on quality and move to an outcome measurement as opposed to just targets. (Panel member, Panel 2)

The nature of the work, especially for those located in regional areas, sometimes made it impossible to enforce boundaries around work, as staff came into contact with clients in their out-of-work hours, preventing them from engaging in psychological detachment (Sonnentag, Binnewies et al. 2010).

> They [staff/caseworkers] see clients in their local supermarkets. The day doesn't end [when you close] your office door … They will see them around town. There are no boundaries. (Panel member, Panel 2)

Burnout and stress for staff in the SHS sector

The examples provided by participants concerning the experiences of workers, especially those working in frontline roles, clearly show that the impact of SHS sector work on mental health is significant. This has been identified by other researchers as having significant consequences over time in this sector (Scanlon and Adlam 2012). Discussions revealed that lack of funding, understaffing, placing staff in roles that are beyond their competency, shift work, and vicarious trauma and stress from exposure to distressing situations have the greatest impact on workers' mental health.

> The fact that the sector is funded in a way that promotes insecure work with a lack of training, professional supervision and support, and unsafe staffing levels … That drives the burnout churn, people wanting to leave the sector … If you then put on top of that a global pandemic … That intensified the work greatly, and it also led to a real crisis of people not wanting to stay in this sector. (Panel member, Panel 2)

> We're asking people to do jobs they don't have the skills to do. What happens is people make poor decisions and because of that they are regarded as poor performers. However, you're asking people to deal with something and to manage something that they're not necessarily capable of managing. However, they make a poor decision and that has a poor outcome, and you have no alternative but to look at it from [the perspective of] poor performance. What we also see in some roles, particularly out of hours, to find people who want to work nights [is difficult] … People find working at night disruptive. [Rotations are] not any better. That does result in turnover because you're trying to cover a 24/7 service and you must push people into positions they don't want to do. (Panel member, Panel 1)

While acknowledging the detrimental effects of the demands of the job on workers, it was also identified that these demands were trickle-down impacts stemming from broader systemic factors.

> A lot of our workers don't suffer vicarious trauma. What they're suffering [from] is dealing with structural barriers … This is battling the system. It's battling the lack of resources. (Panel member, Panel 2)

> Getting no outcome is a real burnout … [Government and funders] aren't saying 'we acknowledge there's a lack of supply, and we are keen to do something about it'. We see it as an emergency. It's this disbelief in what we are telling them. That is burnout material for people who can barely get a lunch break. It's this pattern of despair for people we're seeing over and over, from whom there isn't a housing solution that meets their needs. (Panel member, Panel 3)

The discussion with panellists and interviewees aligned with previous research and information available about the sector, where burnout and high levels of psychological distress are a significant problem in the workforce, driven by work with very high demands and exposure to traumatic contexts.

3.2 Diverse skills required to work in SHS sector

The Investigative Panels and interviews showed that there is no standard work design for the SHS sector. Workers are asked to be proficient in navigating a maze of administrative, policy, procedural and governmental landscapes to access supports and housing for clients, and are required to have a versatile approach and in-depth knowledge to be able to tailor services to individual clients; however, these are not new requirements for working in the sector (Kidd, Miner et al. 2007). Workers are also asked to support clients who experience a range social, emotional, drug and alcohol, domestic and family violence, cultural, trauma and mental health problems.

> You realise in this position that everything links – domestic violence, homelessness, substance use … It's all linked, you can't separate it. (Panel member, Panel 2)

The discussion in each of the three Investigative Panels showed that SHS clients are presenting with increasingly complex issues, which necessitates the broadening and diversifying of SHS workers' skillsets. As the panellist below describes, this may also include physical care, which is often conceptualised as beyond the scope of SHS work but has increasingly become part of the job:

> One thing we've noticed recently, as it comes down to 'how can [workers] have that full skill set?', is we're seeing more and more people [clients] who have more complex mental and physical health issues. At the moment, we have someone who has a drinking issue which, when they're drunk, they become incontinent. The staff are saying, 'that's above my pay grade to deal with'. That's not part of their training, although it's becoming a more frequent occurrence that we're having to provide physical care because there are no other options. This is somebody [the client] who, maybe 12 months ago, we would have had moved into residential aged care. However, now we've had to go through NDIS, they've had to decline them. In the meantime, staff are having to regularly deal with this, and they've got this fear that this person in his drunken state will vomit and choke on his vomit, they'll walk in and find him dead. The challenge is that the design is one thing, but the reality is that when they're out working, staff have got to deal with everything. Often, it's well and truly greater than what they've ever had exposure to in their training or in the opportunities that you [the employer] provide. In terms of continuing to train people up, the challenge is that because our contracts are so thin, there's only so much training you can provide within the envelope of financial resources you have. Therefore, you are picking essential things, which means it's not necessarily tailored to the individual. It's tailored to the broader group. You have a real [skills] deficit that you can't match. (Panel member, Panel 1)

A significant issue identified by participants was the need for diverse training for staff to have the skills and knowledge required to fulfil their roles in the sector:

> Do you fit the work? Do you understand the work? The other [issue is] about the professionalism of the sector and social work … Some of the social workers don't get that you need to clean the dunny. That's just part of the job. It's like, 'oh, that's below me. Will somebody else do that?' No. You get in there as part of sustaining tenancies, looking at how the household is going, sometimes cleaning the house together, learning those living skills. And sometimes people think those jobs are somehow below them. (Panel member, Panel 3)

In addition to breadth of skills across support areas, participants identified specific areas of speciality when working with domestic family violence and communities:

> Domestic violence and specialist homelessness services – often it's not understood that we are homicide prevention services and the level of specialist case management skills that are required to undertake that work. Like others have said, our targets are well exceeded. The demand well exceeds our targets and it's very difficult for workers on the ground to knock back women and children who are at risk of homicide. They're faced with those decisions daily, and that's not understood. The structural barriers was a really important point. One of the things that disillusions and disheartens a lot of our workers who are highly skilled and highly committed is dealing with the system that is not domestic violence informed. (Panel member, Panel 2)

In addition to working in domestic and family violence specialised services, some panellists and interviewees identified that working with specific communities may require additional accommodations, knowledge and connections. For instance, it was discussed that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff working in the SHS sector, there are unique dynamics and cultural responsibilities to manage and follow. Staff may work within their own communities and suddenly find themselves in a position of power relative to their community members. Participants discussed their own experiences of working in their communities, including some instances of rejection and lateral violence. Aboriginal staff working in rural areas within the SHS sector also identified the continued prevalence of outward racism. Other interviewees identified working with services specifically for LGBTQIA+ people and the need for inclusive practice and understanding of LGBTQIA+ experiences for meeting clients' needs (Andrews and McNair 2020), especially youth.

3.3 Obstacles to designing work

Work design exists in a context. As articulated by the panellists and interviewees, work design in the SHS sector appears to exist largely at the whim of external factors. Systemic and structural factors are known to affect the design of jobs, including global, economic, cultural, political and institutional (unions, health and safety) factors (Parker, Van den Broeck et al. 2016). These broader influences can have trickle-down effects for workers' mental health and performance.

> It's the structural [issues] that's causing the burnout, not the actual work. And from a staff member's point of view, how demeaning is it just to keep being told to do more, do more, do more when you're doing fantastic work. (Panel member, Panel 2)

Funding in the sector was identified as a substantial issue for organisations when it came to fulfilling their purpose and for designing work. Limited funding also had the effect of limiting workers' ability to undertake necessary work – in a sense, setting workers up to fail or to fall short. Competitive tendering and shifting expectations, without increases in funding, were specifically identified as obstacles in designing for work.

> To get positive outcomes for clients you need to invest the time with intensive case management and if we don't have the staffing levels adequate for what the numbers we're seeing are, we're not going to get those outcomes. The government's making a wonderful step forward in saying 'yes, we want to focus on outcomes. That's what we're going to base the contracts on. We want to see growth and empowerment of the clients. That's excellent. But we're still going to fund you for this amount even though we know you're seeing this amount.' So, we're not going to have that level of expectation with regards to outcomes. It's horrible to know that you're finally getting where you need to be, [where] it's all about the outcome for the client, [but] you don't have the resources to continue with it. (Panel member, Panel 2)

Discussion around the funding process also identified a need to '*impress the funder*' by seeming to provide a fully comprehensive service (to increase chances of receiving funding); however, in turn, this added additional pressure on frontline workers to perform roles that may not be realistic or achievable.

> We put in everything that we claim our workforce can do. But, in reality, it's not possible to do everything. In the competitive land of tendering, especially for us, a new provider in the housing and homelessness space, where you're trying to impress the funder to get across the line … That's probably not the right way to do it. (Panel member, Panel 1)

A panellist identified that many of the services offered by the SHS sector were human services that may be better suited to government services as opposed to NGOs and not-for-profit organisations. Further, panellists felt that SHS workers were systemically disadvantaged as a consequence of the way the service was funded.

> In terms of the government's role in this, if you boil it down in some way, these are outsourced government jobs. This is government paying community organisations to do the work … But the government don't. Don't oversee a lot of this stuff … in things like job design and things like the classifications that people are working under, like we often see two people doing the exact same job in the exact same funding within SHS. One person is classified on the SCHADS Award at Level 3, one person's classified on the SCHADS Award Level 5. So one of those people can get a home loan, one of those people can't. One of those people, you know, freaks out when a bill arrives, one's a little bit more comfortable. (Panel member, Panel 2)

As one panellist observed, engaging in work design required additional time and resources that took away from the day-to-day business of work in a context in which workers and resources were already stretched very thin. While there was interest to design work better, there was agreement that effecting change within an organisation would be a significant challenge, and that the system itself would benefit from being redesigned.

> I'm seeing a lot of organisations being really creative in that space and try to support the staff however they're still working with that same funding and that the resourcing is just so limited and it's hard to you know, I'm seeing places where you know where it's working a bit, but then also where you're pulling from one area and putting in another area and that the area you pulled from is now you know suffering a little bit so it's yeah, the redesign of a system would be ideal. (Panel member, Panel 3)

Another panellist identified that working within the not-for-profit sector meant gaining approval for organisational changes from a board whose members may be quite removed from the day-to-day work on the ground. Board members may seek to hold the workforce to the same structure and budget that it had previously, despite workers and managers voicing the need for change. Other participants commented that work design was something they would like to engage with to improve the outcomes for their staff; however, they were unsure were to begin. Research in the work design area has shown that those without experience can struggle to design work well (Parker, Andrei et al. 2019), which may suggest that management in the SHS sector would benefit from working with organisational psychologists and other professionals with expertise in work design. However, this too would likely be outside the budgetary reach of many SHS organisations.

Panellists and interviewees identified a disconnect between social policy and funding models and what the operational part of roles in the SHS sector look like. The lack of alignment between these levels was thought to prevent the meaningful (re)design of work. In addition, participants identified the availability of housing as a constant issue for workers and one that needed to be addressed if the nature of their work was going to be meaningfully changed.

> The decision at the government level gets made before we get to the nitty gritty of [job] design. You've got the social policy part and that is the big strategic picture. But when it comes to procurement, they're not linked. So you get a social policy that's giving the big picture – this is the strategy for homelessness, this is how you place people in homes – but there are no homes. And then the government puts out the procurement for service providers to bid for funds. So, the service providers come in, trying to match whatever skills they have and that's got to go with the funding. So, you're trying to match your skills, and everything based on social policy design, which is not aligned because the funding is the much bigger picture when it comes to delivering the services. So, really, the social policy when they're doing this type of work, really needs to address the different levels of homelessness and how the funding goes into them. So, if social policy wants to clean public spaces, they want to clean rough sleepers, they want to deal with that, then there should be a large proportion of the funding that goes specifically for frontline services. Then frontline services can build and design the nature of the role of the worker. (Panel member, Panel 1)

Panellists and interviewees identified the difficulties in engaging in work design when the nature of their role was to respond and react to situations as they arose, depending on client presentation and circumstance. Participants explained that many of their services and frontline workers operated within a crisis framework, which could be problematic for containing and setting parameters for the work design of their staff.

> I think in terms of design, what's really challenging particularly in that 24/7 spaces, that what happens is that out of hours, you tend to have your lowest quality qualified staff, lowest skilled because that's all you can afford because that's all the contract allows. However, out of hours. So let's take, you know, 7:00 o'clock at night when everybody in the accommodation has just got paid and decided it's party time. And you know, they're either drunk or off their face on drugs or, you know, you've got drug dealers outside. There's a fight. The police are coming. So I think the problem with work design is that you can spend as much time as you want on it. However, in reality, because at different times, there are only limited people away, the design becomes irrelevant because they have to respond to what's happening. And then what happens is you do get the vicarious trauma because people are having to deal with some quite challenging situations, and therefore they have to just do the best they can. (Panel member, Panel 1)

Further, members of the Investigative Panels discussed the difficulty of designing work when their staff were required to have a diverse skillset but may not, in reality, have had the opportunity to be trained in all areas. This could be due to insufficiencies in educational offerings and/or a lack of funding or resources within the organisation to provide training.

> I think the challenge is that the design is one thing, but the reality is that when they're out working, staff have got to deal with everything. And often it's well and truly greater than what they've ever had exposure to in their training or the work and opportunities that [the organisation can] provide. And I think in terms of that continuing to train people up, the challenge is that because again our contracts are so thin that there's only so much training you can provide within the envelope of financial resources that you have. And so therefore you are picking essential things, which means it's not necessarily tailored to the individual. It's tailored to the broader group and so you have a real deficit that you can't match or meet. (Panel member, Panel 1)

In addition to the complex and changing situations presented to workers on the frontline are broader factors such as COVID-19. Operating within homelessness services during the pandemic added another layer of complexity and challenge to providing services and to regulating workers' day-to-day activities. Some of these have been identified in recent research acknowledging the distinct challenges for the sector and its workforce (McCosker, Ware et al. 2022).

3.4 Summary of key findings

The panels and interviews revealed that workers in the SHS sector continue to navigate complex work with high demands, and are required to work largely independently and with varying levels of support. Work in the sector is very demanding, not only in terms of workload but also in terms of the emotional demands and potential for exposure to vicarious trauma. It is unlikely that these demands will be able to be alleviated entirely; however, they could potentially be better managed. Diverse skills in a range of key areas are necessary for workers to be able to fulfil their roles and respond to the needs of their clients. Much is asked of workers. And, while individual organisations are working hard to support staff, the level of support and opportunity they are able to provide remains limited. Many of the factors influencing work design remain outside the control of workers and, indeed, employers, as funding and the lack of available housing negatively impacts everyone's capacity to produce desired outcomes.

Therefore, the question remains: how can work be designed when the resources needed to design it well are not available? The recommendations below seek to help individuals and organisations to better support workers through improved work design.

- There is a risk of workers in the SHS sector being exposed to the TMGT effect, as their roles include very high levels of diverse and varied work, as well as very high levels of autonomy and self-direction. The antidote is not to increase restrictions and 'box workers in', but, rather, to increase the levels of support available, including peer supervision, manager supervision and clinical supervision. There may opportunities to increase the relational components of work specifically to create well-connected teams that share resources and provide co-worker social support.

- There is a need for balance in the work design of key SMART characteristics, especially the 'stimulating' and 'agency' characteristics. There is an opportunity to use job crafting (Knight, Patterson et al. 2019; Tims, Bakker et al. 2013; Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001) to empower workers to change their work to better suit their needs and capacity.

- There is a need to reduce work demands where practicable, especially extraneous administrative tasks that could be completed by non-frontline workers.

4. Motivation and retention

- **The SHS sector does not provide adequate financial security for employees, resulting in poor staff retention, work performance and overall wellbeing.**

- **Employees need to be, and to feel, competent. This need for competence is consistently not being fulfilled in the SHS sector due to a lack of training and supervision, limited career progression opportunities and challenges associated with being able to house clients in the current climate of limited affordable dwellings.**

- **SHS administrators are under extreme pressure to obtain funding and meet targets, which makes it difficult to create a leadership style that allows staff to participate and fulfil their need for autonomy.**

- **SHS agencies involved in this research are aware of the importance of meaningful connections and actively create opportunities for staff to connect with one another and celebrate successes.**

This chapter is focused on understanding what shapes motivation among homelessness sector workers. It examines how existing incentive and performance management structures affect staff motivation and retention.

Research shows that motivation depends on satisfying workers' needs (Deci and Ryan 2000; Van den Broeck, Ferris et al. 2016). Self-determination theory is quite informative about how to foster high quality work motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985; Ryan and Deci 2017). The theory proposes that the reasons why people put effort into their work (i.e. the source of workers' motivation) has consequences for performance, retention and mental health. It distinguishes between intrinsic motivation (i.e. doing something out of enjoyment and interest) and extrinsic motivation (i.e. doing something for an instrumental reason). In general, intrinsic motivation is related to better performance, retention and wellbeing (see Van den Broeck, Howard et al. 2021 for a meta-analysis). However, there is the possibility for extrinsic motivation to not only be based on wanting to obtain rewards (e.g. money) or avoid punishments (e.g. being sacked), which are the classic forms of extrinsic motivation. Rather, self-determination theory proposes that people have the capacity to internalise the value of an activity, even if that activity is not inherently pleasant or enjoyable. Such a state describes another form of extrinsic motivation labelled 'identified motivation'. Identified motivation is defined as doing something deemed uninteresting but considered by the doer to be important. Indeed, a lot of work activities could accurately be described as

uninteresting and yet important, making this type of motivation particularly relevant to the work domain (Gagné and Deci 2005). Further, research has shown that identified motivation is almost as strongly associated with performance, retention and wellbeing as is intrinsic motivation (Van den Broeck, Howard et al. 2021). Therefore, whatever organisations can do to help promote intrinsic and identified forms of motivation – often together labelled as 'autonomous motivation' – will likely pay off.

Motivation can be promoted through satisfying the needs of workers. These needs may be physical, such as the need for food, shelter, education and healthcare. Meeting these needs not only affects life choices, such as buying a property and having children (Leana and Meuris 2015), but also wellbeing (Jebb, Tay et al. 2018; Kahneman and Deaton 2010) and even life expectancy (Chetty, Stepner et al. 2016). Physical needs are satisfied through the provision of secure employment and earnings (Odle-Dusseau, Matthews et al. 2018; Sverke, Hellgren et al. 2002). There is strong evidence that financial insecurity is associated with negative outcomes including disrupted cognitive functioning, which can affect job performance due to its impact on learning and decision-making, even including decrements in ethical decision-making (John, Loewenstein et al. 2014; Pitesa and Thau 2014; Sharma, Nina et al. 2014). Financial insecurity has also been linked to lower health and wellbeing (Haushofer and Fehr 2014; Howell, Kurai et al. 2013; Leana and Meuris 2015). Therefore, providing secure employment and an income that provides for these basic physical needs is vital.

Self-determination theory additionally proposes that autonomous motivation is fostered through the satisfaction of basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness (Deci and Ryan 2000). The need for competence is the need to feel effective in one's work and is usually promoted through ensuring a fit of skills to the job, adequate training, the adequate provision of resources to do the work and constructive performance feedback. The need for autonomy is the need to feel volitional or like the agent of one's own behaviour as opposed to feeling like a 'pawn' to external pressures. It is usually promoted through the adoption of participative management styles. The need for relatedness is the need to feel meaningful connections with the people we encounter at work; it can be promoted through the minimisation of a competitive atmosphere and the promotion of cooperation, as well as through the provision of sufficient time to communicate or work with others and understand individual needs and circumstances.

These three needs are considered basic in the sense that their frustration has been shown to lead to decrements in functioning (i.e. performance and wellbeing) and they are considered universal in the sense that they have been shown to be important, regardless of culture or other demographic factors (Chen, Vansteenkiste et al. 2015; Nalipay, King et al. 2020; Sheldon, Elliot et al. 2001). In the work domain, all three needs have been associated with higher autonomous work motivation, as well as with many work outcomes, including performance, retention and wellbeing (see Van den Broeck, Ferris et al. 2016 for a meta-analysis). Thus, promoting autonomous work motivation comes down to ensuring that systems and organisational practices satisfy these three psychological needs.

As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, employees are attracted to the SHS sector for intrinsic reasons – or, as self-determination theory would argue, out of autonomous motivation – and have a genuine desire to help people. They are motivated through personal experiences and values, the desire to make a difference in the lives of others and the desire to make meaningful connections with colleagues and clients. Reflecting on what motivates their staff, one Investigative Panel member explained that:

> It comes back to their own personal values and who they are as individuals. And I think that makes a really big difference. And I think that they're generally the staff who have those internal motivators are the ones that can withstand, you know, the most complex situations. (Panel member, Panel 3)

Interviewees also described, in their own words, what motivates them to work in the sector:

> We like to nurture people and help people. From personal experiences too, that's what drew me to this job (Interviewee)

> I'm very motivated in this role. It's great to see a high number of indigenous workers, which makes me feel very comfortable not ever being in this role before (Interviewee)

> This role is very fulfilling. Your own experience, and connecting with the women that are going through what you once went through. (Interviewee)

Though people are attracted to work in the sector out of autonomous motivation, the system and organisational structures in which they subsequently work can negatively impact their ongoing motivation and, ultimately, their performance, retention and wellbeing. The remainder of the chapter will examine each of the structures that affect workers' needs, satisfaction and motivation; explain how workers are, or are not, fulfilled, in the homelessness sector; and attempt to uncover reasons why. It will then identify potential solutions that might ensure workers are motivated to not only work in, but also remain in, the SHS sector.

4.1 Financial security

4.1.1 Remuneration

One important 'need' people fulfil through work is financial security. Research on basic income demonstrates that when pay is below what is considered 'basic income level', people feel more stress and have lower wellbeing because they have trouble meeting their and their family's basic needs for food, shelter, education and health (e.g. Jebb, Tay et al. 2018). In describing the remuneration offered to staff in the SHS sector, one manager explained that:

> I think we probably maintain people in poverty or just below about just above the poverty line. So, there's a lack of opportunity to migrate into other work areas or work forces and lack of confidence to do so. You know, it's a, it's sadly a reinforcing kind of step … but some of the lower paid jobs there's no opportunity to change your status, no opportunity to move forward … it's lack of confidence … and yeah, [a] 'you're stuck with your lot' kind of thing. It's quite bleak. Sorry. (Panel member, Panel 1)

A frontline employee agreed with this view when they noted that: '*They expect people to run on the goodness of their own heart. NGOs take advantage of that*' (Interviewee).

The perception that remuneration in the SHS sector is low was not shared unanimously. Many interviewees felt that the pay they received was fair for the work they undertook; however, this becomes an issue when the income level is not enough to provide basic needs:

> The pay is enough – it's nothing terrible that I need to find a new job because I can't support myself. But in comparison to the work I do, and the risks involved, and the toll it takes on the people in the industry, the compensation should be higher. And I also don't have a particularly high expenditure – but if you had debts and mortgages, it would be a struggle. (Interviewee)

When the amount of pay does not allow staff to meet their financial needs, the result is high staff turnover. Many SHS staff find that are unable to remain in the sector for long periods of time, even though they might wish to, and many leave to accrue savings or job security, before returning to the sector. As this panel member explained, it is difficult to retain staff consistently and in the long-term:

> And some of our staff will say … 'I think I need to go do a stint at [a government department] just to get some savings behind me. I'll hate the job, but I need to get some savings behind me and then go back into [the SHS sector]'. (Panel member, Panel 2)

In the SHS sector, employees are paid under the Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry Award 2020 or the 'SCHADS Award' (Fair Work Commission 2010; Fair Work Ombudsman 2022). However, in 2011, the Australian Services Union (ASU) argued that the remuneration received under this award was not commensurate with that received by others undertaking similar public sector roles (ASU 2012). As one interviewee explained, the union argued to Fair Work Commission that the:

> sector, as a part of the broader community services sector, had been historically undervalued for two reasons … One because 70–80 per cent of the workforce are women. And secondly, because the nature of the work has been … devalued as women's work as well, in terms of [being a] caring industry and not properly recognised for the skilful professional practice that it is. (Panel member, Panel 2)

The ASU was successful and, in 2012, Fair Work Australia issued the Social, Community and Disability Services Industry Equal Remuneration Order (ERO), which delivered a 23–45 per cent increase in pay, to be phased in over a period of eight years to December 2020 (ASU 2012). As a result, employees in the SHS sector have only been receiving fair remuneration for the last two years.

The argument ASU made to Fair Work Australia, which was key to its campaign, was that the SHS sector was almost exclusively:

> funded by government. Most of them don't have any significant income streams other than government and it's a human services industry. So the vast majority of expenses are labour costs … account[ing] for at least 80 per cent of a standard homelessness service budget. And … [i]t is also award reliant, so [they] don't have a proliferation of enterprise agreements in the sector. (Panel member, Panel 2)

As a result of the ERO, state and federal funding to the sector was adjusted to meet the costs of the wage increase (ASU 2012).

Despite these steps towards equal pay, there is no remuneration standard within the community sector more generally. This issue appears to be affecting workers' perceptions of fairness, which is well known to affect work motivation and retention (Colquitt, Conlon et al. 2001). For example, one Investigative Panel member explained that, as staff network with other community sector employees outside the SHS sector, they realise the inconsistencies and it impacts their motivation:

> the youth development officer at the council is getting paid more than me and yet they just run festivals every quarter and you're like, yeah, I'm carrying a caseload of 20 and running around and doing all this stuff. And so that impacts their motivation. (Panel member, Panel 2)

There is strong evidence that the ability to make a meaningful change in people's lives and to receive satisfaction in their role is a big motivator in the SHS sector. While this Investigative Panel member notes that SHS employees are not paid at the same level on the SCHADS Award as other community sector employees, they also note that the role offers rewards that are more valuable, albeit intangible:

> we don't pay the same level of wage at the SCHADS Awards that … we would like to purely because of the funding. But what I've noticed is some workers are aware of that, but they think well, for an extra dollar an hour, is it really worth going to another service because the award itself isn't great anyway … [For example,] recently a worker went for a job thinking that it was more money [higher on the award], but really it end up being less money in terms of the travel amount … and her decision was 'well this [current employer offers] a great service that's really important the works really important' [and decided not to move] … But I just thought I'd share that because, you know, on some levels it was great to keep that worker. But then on another level, it's like … where else will they go and still get the same amount of satisfaction that they're getting in this workplace? (Panel member, Panel 2)

The impact of the funding model on the award level at which staff in SHS agencies are employed is also important.

Tendering for funding and the impact on remuneration

SHS agencies apply for funding through a competitive tendering process to finance the services delivered to clients. This approach means that agencies are competing against similar not-for-profit organisations for a limited pool of capital. The process requires agencies to describe the service and the cost of running it, which is then compared with commensurate applications. As service delivery costs are dominated by personnel costs, this can become problematic for staff. One participant explained that, as all SHS employees are on the same minimum wage through the SCHADS Award, it is hard to compete on that basis. Therefore, to remain competitive against other SHS agencies, compromises need to be made on service quality or employment conditions. The latter (employment conditions) is often used, with implications for staff remuneration. For example, it is common for SHS agencies to draft tenders that fail to reflect the award levels that staff should be contracted on. Instead, to reduce costs, they:

> misclassify people or [do] not recognise expertise … So, for example, it has generally been accepted and evidenced in the Fair Work equal pay decision that a caseworker in homelessness would be starting around Level 4 of the award and there are eight levels in the award. A senior or complex caseworker would be Level 5, for example. What we've seen over the last few years, through these competitive practices, is suddenly entry-level is a Level 3 now and organisations aren't even offering specialist levels even though the work is being done to that extent. So [the competitive funding process] is undermining equal pay [conditions]. (Panel member, Panel 2)

Panel members commented on how much more could be accomplished if organisations were not competing against one another to obtain funding, but instead were cooperating to achieve synergies.

Ways to make up for low remuneration

Most SHS agencies that participated in the Investigative Panels discussed the additional financial rewards they offer to their staff. These ranged from birthday leave, working to a 37-and-a-half-hour award week rather than 38, additional funeral leave, Christmas vouchers and workplace Christmas lunches. One organisation that provides continuous day and night outreach to Aboriginal people and had a high proportion of staff that are also Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, explained that:

> We don't work on Australia Day. We give them that off as well because there are multiple … feelings about that day, so we just let [staff] do what they want to do on that day. (Panel member, Panel 1)

The overall aim of these initiatives was to provide additional financial benefits to staff contracts beyond what is expected by the award.

4.1.2 Job security

Financial security is also obtained through having job security – that is, the prospect that an employee will retain their job in the long-term (Sverke, Hellgren et al. 2002; Sverke, Låstad et al. 2019). Our interviews and panel discussions revealed that it is very challenging for SHS agencies to provide job security to their staff. Moreover, this challenge is principally a function of the way in which governments fund the homelessness sector. One panel member articulated the impact of the funding model on job security through the practice of short-term contracts:

> it has become a practice of governments to give one, two or three-year funding contracts, so that practice promotes insecure work arrangements. That's when organisations say, 'Oh well, we can only employ you on a fixed-term arrangement. Or we can only employ you on a two-year contract or we cannot give anyone a permanent job.' So, there is a real proliferation of insecure work in the community services industry, predominantly through the form of fixed-term employment or rolling fixed-term contracts. [There is] not as much casual work because the hours [aren't available], the funding is there, but because it is time limited, employers are often then hesitant to provide permanent employment, so that is something that drives people away from the sector as well, because you don't have job security in the sector. (Panel member, Panel 2)

> before, when we had contracts tied to the funding length and so staff contracts, we would be coming very close to the wire and staff would be coming to us saying 'well, unfortunately I'm going to have to look for another job somewhere else … unless you can actually re-fund this position'. So, [the organisation] will often [be in a] catch 22 situation because staff simply need to know that they had some security moving forward. (Panel member, Panel 1)

Delivering only short-term funding to organisations in a sector that is primarily funded by government expenditure has a significant impact on employee financial security, a key factor in shaping employee motivation and retention. As a consequence of the funding model, organisations are obliged to offer contracts to workers that are often only 12–18 months long. Panel members described the high level of uncertainty that exists at an organisational level as these short-term contracts draw to a close and there is no communication from government departments in regard to the renewal of the contracts. One panellist said:

> You don't get anything with any assurance … you've got so many one-off contracts that you don't know where it's going to go …they're not things we've got control over. (Panel member, panel 1)

A panellist in a different state described a similar scenario in which:

> The [state government] department is unfortunately not the best at getting decisions made and released early. So, we have been in situations where we've only found out that we've secured the funding less than a month before the workers are at the end of their contracts. (Panel member, Panel 1)

The (un)timeliness of contract renewals has a significant impact on the retention of staff as a function of the lack of job security that is provided by the funding model. The uncertainty experienced at an organisational level has flow-on implications at the individual level as well. For example:

> Organisations … struggle towards the end of the funding cycle … because the job security [causes] a lot of people to jump ship, even if there is a likelihood that the job [will] get an extension or that their service will be extended. There's a long period of time where there isn't certainty provided by the department and a lot of staff unfortunately have to be looking after themselves as well as looking after their family or, you know, to pay their own bills. The organisations can be losing quality staff because [staff] need to be looking out for their own job security and even go to another community organisation or go elsewhere where there's more permanent job opportunities outside of the sector. (Panel member, Panel 3)

When a lack of job security is coupled with low remuneration, there is a significant impact on employee financial security. Panel members were aware that the nature of the contracts made it difficult for staff to take out a loan for a car or a mortgage for a house. The limited financial security, as the following panel member demonstrates, forces employees to consider work outside the sector to provide for their basic needs:

> I'm paid relatively low and I don't mean you know that any employer here is intentionally paying low. What I mean is that [my role is] underfunded, [my role] is not respected by the funding model … so I think that the government is responsible for the issues with retention in a lot of ways. I think that bleeds into job security and having ongoing work in the sector and being able to know that you will have a job in 12 months or in five years as long as you keep doing that job … and pay to … not just to be able to pay the bills, but to have a comfortable life. So, you know, to be able to occasionally have a holiday go on a road trip, something like that … how do you [raise a family and have some comforts] on a community services wage? (Panel member, Panel 2)

Given that research has shown that not meeting the 'basic income' threshold and having insecure employment and income has repercussions for both work performance and wellbeing, this issue is likely to become costly at a societal level (Haushofer and Fehr 2014; Howell, Kurai et al. 2013; Leana and Meuris 2015). The findings show

that the design of the funding model, in particular, is having a significant impact on SHS employees' capacity to achieve financial security, which, in turn, has implications for staff retention and motivation. The long-term funding of the sector through previous iterations of the NHHA demonstrates a continued need for these services within the community. One panellist argued that the '*sector exists so that government [doesn't] have to run the services*' (Panel member, Panel 1). Given the longevity of this sector, and its alignment with government services, it was argued that those employed in the SHS sector should be offered the same security and support currently provided to government employees.

4.2 Psychological needs and employee functioning

The psychological need for satisfaction is also crucially important to workers' performance, retention and wellbeing. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, three needs have been found to be particularly important: the need to feel competent and autonomous and the need for relatedness to others.

4.2.1 Competence

Competence is fulfilled when people have the necessary skills and resources to accomplish their work in a way that has a positive impact on its beneficiaries. The clients that SHS sector staff work with have complex issues that require high-level skills.

Building skills

Our interviews and panel discussions revealed that the funding model does not allow homelessness organisations to attract people with adequate skills due to non-competitive pay and short contract lengths, which are all that can be afforded based on the funding received. This is because homelessness organisations are competing for funding and are incentivised to bid as low as possible to obtain funding. As a result, organisations end up sacrificing essential work and resources to successfully bid for funding. The outcome of this process is that the funding does not permit organisations to provide sufficient training or external clinical supervision to support competent work, as this panellist explained:

> [When the true cost of the service is not funded] that's when corners get cut. And what gets cut? Training [and] external supervision that [provide] support to staff. And then you know we ask [why] our staff are experiencing burnout [but the reality is that] there's not enough funding and [high client to] staffing ratios. One positive thing I can add on the ratio is [that] we have been [in] discussions with the state government [to] review one of our contracts [by explaining] '… this is the ratio that we are working to, so this is what it's going to cost to run this service' and …'if we can't do that, then we can't deliver the service'. (Panel member, Panel 3)

Staff attracted to work in the SHS sector tend to be ill-prepared for what they will face in their jobs and insufficiently trained for their work in the delivery of services; consequently, they feel that their services do not have the desired impact.

Panellists across each of the states expressed a consistent view that service agreements do not reflect the real scale of demand for SHS services, which have increased over time in the context of a growing housing crisis in many regions. Panellists explained that underfunding relative to the scale of need means that individual workers are taking on significant additional workloads, and that the incapacity to respond to the full scale of service demand is impacting morale.

> What we're finding is that we're contracted and funded and therefore staffed to see, you know 283 hundred clients a year and every year we're consistently seeing 700, 750. You can't provide that intensive case management that some clients need to address underlying issues when you're trying to turn people through the door … it's the staffing resources. We just need some extra staff and we just don't have the funds to employ them. (Panel member, Panel 2)

> You go home each night and you feel like you've failed as a worker because you simply can't help people in their greatest time of need. We have a very good organisation … we take our self-care and wellness very seriously with our staff. But it doesn't matter how much you do that as an organisation if you simply can't get results for the clients that you're trying to care for it has a massive impact on your own psyche. (Panel member, Panel 2)

A panellist from an industry advocacy organisation explained that this is occurring at the sector level, where there is a consistent gap between contract costs and the price of delivering services. This means that '*services just don't have sustainable funding*' and workers do not receive '*fair work and fair pay*' (Panel member, Panel 1).

Funding does not adequately supply needed resources to deliver adequate services that help prevent homelessness and/or prevent relapse into homelessness. These resources include the required number of staff per shift (especially during shifts where there is high demand for services, i.e. evenings/nights and weekends, which attract award rates), inadequate housing for clients and inadequate coordination between services. This increases safety risks for staff and decreases adequate service delivery. All of these contribute to feeling incompetent, which increases the wellbeing risks and turnover rates, which, in turn and over time, further compounds staffing issues.

Career progression opportunities

The research found that the opportunities for professional development and training were limited, even though individual organisations are working hard to facilitate opportunities where they are able. In addition, many workers do not feel they have good career advancement opportunities in the homelessness sector. The funding model only allows organisations to offer short-term contracts or casual work to staff, hampering any attempts to progress their career through promotions or even having the chance to do role rotations. The consequence of this is that staff do not remain in the homelessness sector, culminating in a loss of knowledge in the sector. A funding model that provides more long-term stable funding would help with the retention of staff into the homelessness sector and build skills that would lead to more sustainable and impactful services to clients. Moreover, a funding model that encourages cooperation between homelessness organisations would foster more opportunities for skill building and career advancement among the sector's workers, ultimately increasing and keeping knowledge within the sector.

Even in organisations that can provide some training for their staff, other issues around career advancement and appropriate resources often lead proficient staff to leave the sector even after receiving training. This discourages organisations to invest in training.

> It really depends on the team you come from … it comes down to whoever is running that service and how they run it. [It] makes a big impact on how much opportunity there is for growth. (Interviewee)

> The other side of it is the training. [This organisation] is very well known for the training that they provide and it's very good training … the downside of that, from a manager's point of view, we provide all this wonderful training … but then we also lose good staff … to other organisations … often, we train [staff] up and then they go to a government [department] because government offer higher salaries [and that cycle] can be challenging too. I feel like we're a training ground sometimes for the government. (Interviewee)

The capacity to support workforce development was found to differ between smaller state-based organisations compared to those with national outreach. Larger organisations tended to be more professionalised with more defined support structures and systems in place for human resource services, such as recruiting and training.

Recognition of impact

The motivation for many staff working in the SHS sector is the value they hold for solving this societal issue. They primarily join SHS agencies to have an impact on homelessness. Findings from both the interviews and panel discussions revealed that recognising the impact of work accomplished by staff is crucial to their motivation:

> It's the people [clients] I work with, it's the reward factor of seeing them and watching them progress. But also, I like a challenge. Empowering and influencing people to take control, to identify and remove their barriers, and help to find ways to overcome them, and realise that they can do it. (Interviewee)

Therefore, the biggest reward staff can receive from their work is feeling that it is having a positive impact on clients. Panel members explained the importance of organisations communicating these positive impacts to staff, as well as recognising individual efforts towards them. For example:

> Employees value being valued like knowing how [they are] contributing to the overall mission. (Panel member, Panel 3)

> It's really important to allow time to celebrate wins … because you can be working with someone and have no good outcomes for three months and your morale can just dip. But hearing from one of your colleagues or from another location of a success story and allowing the conversation to occur and allow the sharing of that … and acknowledging and celebrating the win … [it] just lifts people's demeanour. (Panel member, Panel 3)

> finding time and structures to really make visible [to other] workers the good stories … because in the very busy … crazy frontline work environment, we can lose sight of just how much skill and commitment and level of work it takes to pull off some pretty amazing things … [so] to actually celebrate the work – from their CEO to their manager – seeing that, and celebrating that [good story] … is really important. (Panel member, Panel 2)

Some organisations report giving out awards to staff based on a peer-voting system, while others celebrate 'wins' through team-based activities, such as staff barbecues or celebrations. For example, one panellist explained how they recognised the work of their staff at several meetings throughout the year:

> will generally do it through a voting system, but we award staff just with a small award just for the work that they've done, and that's generally voted in by other managers, co-workers. So, it's just a recognition of their work. (Panel member, Panel 1)

Panel members and interviewees commented on the limited impact homelessness organisations can have on their own. Some noted that the funding model only allows them to provide 'patchwork' services that are not sustainable and do not provide long-term solutions for clients. The inability to provide long-term solutions affects the motivation and retention of employees within the sector, as one panellist described:

> I would say the biggest issue at the moment is the housing crisis and the motivation for the workforce to be hopeful for the people that they're supporting … I think one of the staff members [who has now resigned] … said 'I cannot deal with everyday giving a young person a tent and a sleeping bag'. (Panel member, Panel 3)

In addition to funding constraints, this challenge is exacerbated by the lack of affordable housing in both the social housing and public rental sectors. Despite investment in social housing in most states and territories, the waitlists and demand for affordable rental housing remain extremely high. In June 2021, there were 163,500 households on the waiting list for public housing, including 67,656 who were considered to have priority need (AIHW 2022b). In the private rental sector, Anglicare's national survey of 45,992 dwellings available for rent found that only eight properties would be affordable to a single person receiving JobSeeker and most household types had less options available to them when compared to the 2021 survey (Bourke and Foo 2022).

4.2.2 Autonomy

The need for autonomy is fulfilled when people can participate in decision-making. This requires adequate skill levels and a leadership style that allows people to participate.

Participative decision-making gives people a sense of ownership and voice that empowers and engages them. It requires sharing more information with staff, which makes them understand organisational decisions better. When people understand such decisions, they are more likely to endorse them and work towards the achievement of organisational goals. It can also lead to better organisational decision-making, as different viewpoints and additional information is gathered from staff, making the organisation more efficient. Thus, it is win-win, both for the organisation (better decisions, staff retention, better performance) and for staff (better engagement and wellbeing) (Cotton, Vollrath et al. 1988; Miller and Monge 1986).

Having inadequately trained staff can make it difficult for administrators to use a participative style of decision-making, as this tends to work best when people can contribute competent ideas or points of view (Vroom and Yetton 1973). Moreover, giving people autonomy does not mean *not* providing structure altogether. Autonomy alone does not provide people with meaningful goals. Indeed, the absence of structure or guidance can negatively affect people's autonomous work motivation (Aelterman, Vansteenkiste et al. 2019; Grolnick and Ryan 1989). Structure, including procedures and guidelines, helps people feel competent and helps with the coordination of actions between different organisational players, ultimately making the organisation more effective. When conveyed in a way that explains why they exist and how they will help performance, procedures can support the need for autonomy.

Impact of funding model on management styles

Our interviews and panel discussions also revealed that administrators experience considerable pressure to obtain funding and then meet the targets set through such funding, detracting from their ability to set up a managerial structure that would allow time for participation. In other words, they spend too much time 'managing up' (e.g. measuring and reporting KPIs and chasing up funding) and not enough time 'managing in'. As a result, they end up putting pressure on staff to meet targets set through the funding model. Putting pressure on staff in this manner is highly likely to decrease feelings of autonomy, resulting in disempowerment and disengagement, which is likely to compound the problem of staff turnover.

> So you can have all these wonderful things. But if your manager is not a good fit, [you're] going to leave … People don't leave good jobs, they leave bad managers. And some of that is, some managers become so pressurised by all this other stuff, that they've become dictators. (Panel member, Panel 2)

Impact of funding model on outcomes

Target-focused reporting to funding agencies concentrates on a narrow set of measurable outcomes rather than on quality services that might focus on prevention and relapse. An emphasis on short-term outcomes (reflecting short-term funding) does not yield sustainable improvements for clients. The consequence of focusing on quantifiable outcomes for staff and managers is the loss of meaning behind the numbers. Indeed, research on the quantification of work demonstrates that it erodes the meaning of the work (Schafheitle, Weibel et al. 2020), which, in the SHS sector, is meant to have a sustainable impact on the lives of the homeless. Lack of meaning at work erodes staff's feelings of volition or autonomy for the work to be done; instead of wholeheartedly wanting to deliver services to change the lives of the homeless, managers focus on meeting targets that are less meaningful to them, their staff and the clients, and only seem to satisfy the funders. In other words, instead of focusing on client needs in delivering services, SHS agencies focus on satisfying funders. In the end, the purpose of SHS organisations is to make homelessness a thing of the past. If short-term targets are not in line with this goal, the SHS sector is not as efficient as it could be, and the funding cannot be used optimally.

4.2.3 Meaningful connections

The need for relatedness is fulfilled when people meaningfully connect with one another and when they support each other. This can be achieved through work design that facilitates teamwork and through considerate and supportive climates within organisations (Gagné, Parker et al. 2021).

Overall, SHS agencies involved in this research through Investigative Panels and interviews appear aware of the importance of meaningful connections and actively create opportunities for staff to connect with one another. Staff are primarily attracted to the SHS sector because they value the profession and can work with like-minded people with whom they can connect. Participants spoke of the importance of teamwork to accomplish good service delivery:

> I think teams are a critical part of how we work together and as we lose a member of the team, if for any reason and another member joins the team is still paramount. To [me, the team is] more paramount than the individual. (Panel member, Panel 1)

Many organisations try to enhance a team spirit through team activities, having a dedicated budget for team-building activities and allocated team-building days such as barbecues or dinners. Some also give out contribution awards through a peer-voting system. For example:

> we have at least two staff away days where [we are] focused very much on team building … coming together [as a team to undertake activities that are not focused on case management] are very important … [to show staff that they are] valued. It comes down from through leadership, so we'll make sure that all our leaders are on the floor. (Panel member, Panel 1)

Unfortunately, the funding model does not encourage cooperation between organisations within a state. Changing the funding model to encourage cooperation would enhance the support that organisations can give each other to create synergies (through better knowledge and resource sharing) that are necessary for the whole sector to have a sustainable impact on societal-level homelessness.

4.3 Summary of key findings

The analysis found that employees in the SHS sector are motivated by intrinsic reasons with a desire to help people and make meaningful connections with colleagues and clients. Quality and lasting motivation in the workplace is shaped by the capacity to meet both physical (e.g. financial security) and psychological (e.g. competence, autonomy and meaningful connections) needs of employees.

It was found that the SHS sector does not provide adequate financial security for employees, resulting in negative implications for staff retention, work performance and overall wellbeing. This lack of financial security is a function of low remuneration and poor job security. There is no consistency of remuneration between the SHS sector and community sector organisations generally, which means that SHS employees may not be paid at the same award level as those in other sectors undertaking similar roles. Attempts are being made to offset the low remuneration received in the SHS sector through additional financial rewards, such as extra days off, vouchers or shorter working weeks. Job security is also tied to short-term contracted programs funded by the state. The renewal of funding for these programs is uncertain and not communicated to organisations in a timeframe that supports effective decision-making around staffing. This uncertainty is passed onto the employee, affecting not only motivation and retention but also work performance and individual wellbeing.

The interviews and Investigative Panels revealed that the psychological needs of employees are not always met through performance management structures, and that this shapes the experience of competence, autonomy and meaningful connections of SHS employees. The need for competence is not fulfilled in the workplace due to a lack of training and supervision, limited career progression opportunities and challenges associated with being able to house clients in the current housing environment. At the same time, SHS administrators are under

considerable pressure to obtain funding and meet targets, functions that hinder a leadership style that allows staff to participate and fulfil their need for autonomy. However, it was found that SHS organisations are not only aware of the importance of structures that allow employees to meaningfully connect with one another, but also actively create opportunities for employees to support each other through teamwork and recognition of success.

The biggest change required to solve most of the motivational challenges encountered by SHS organisations and the sector as a whole is the funding model. The current funding model creates competition for scarce resources that are insufficient to run efficient services for the homeless, perpetuating the problem of homelessness in Australia. It hampers organisations' ability to attract (see below) and retain competent staff and to cooperate with other local organisations that would enhance the services they can provide. It also hampers organisations' capacity to satisfy their staff's basic psychological needs, negatively affecting their levels of engagement and ultimately leading to lower staff retention (Gagné and Forest 2020; Gagné, Nordgren Selar et al. 2022).

A funding model that encourages cooperation and provides more long-term staffing and other resources to the homelessness sector would:

- help attract and retain competent staff

- allow organisations to share resources and provide more career pathways for staff, which would help with building skills within the sector (including exchange of knowledge), external supervision, and retention

- allow SHS agencies to focus on longer term targets and relieve managers from spending too much of their time on reporting and applying for funding, freeing up time for managers to adopt a more participative style of leadership to empower and engage staff, which would improve services further and cull turnover

- lead to the optimal use of the funding provided to the sector in making communities more resilient to homelessness.

Attracting and retaining competent staff would not only help provide stability and consistency of services but also retain knowledge within the sector. Moreover, it would provide job and financial security to workers in the sector, which should be a goal of government as it affects Australian society both in terms of instability and the cost of managing the resulting mental health problems caused by stress (Di Domenico and Fournier 2014).

Organisations that attempt to provide more training and external supervision to their staff, and those that ensure that staff efforts are recognised, seem to fare better, despite funding issues. Though it is difficult to sustain such staff resources in the current funding context, it is important to emphasise that organisations should start (or continue) to provide training and external supervision to their staff. Organisations should also recognise the positive impacts of the work done by staff to maintain engagement and retention.

5. Recruiting, assessing and selecting staff in the SHS sector

- **Employer brand awareness, and the reputation of the sector more generally, are weak, impacting the ability to attract and recruit skilled and qualified applicants to the SHS sector.**

- **The skills and abilities of recruits often do not meet the requirements of the roles.**

- **The value proposition (i.e. what an employer can offer to recruits) to potential skilled employees is relatively weak, meaning that those with the requisite skills are likely to look elsewhere.**

- **Growing the applicant pool may require diversification of recruitment strategies; however, targeted recruitment is challenging and may require additional support.**

Recruitment, assessment and selection of new personnel are human resource functions that can determine overall organisational effectiveness (Crook, Todd et al. 2011). It is through these functions that an organisation can accumulate and maintain its human capital – that is, the organisation's aggregated knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (Koch and McGrath 1996; Ployhart and Kim 2014). Recruitment refers to the processes through which an organisation seeks to attract new members, whether those new members are volunteers or paid employees (Barber 1998; Rynes and Barber 1990). Recruitment is distinct from assessment and selection, which describe the processes through which an organisation evaluates the applicants it recruits (assessment) and decides which of the applicants to invite to join (selection). Failures to recruit effectively will prevent organisations from growing and maintaining staff levels, potentially undermining their ability to be effective in achieving their goals (Ployhart and Kim 2014). The review of the grey and academic literature relating to the SHS workforce, combined with the findings from the interviews and Investigative Panels, demonstrated that attracting applicants to jobs has been, and continues to be, a major and persistent challenge faced by organisations in the SHS sector.

In this chapter, we first review some of the basic concepts relevant to these functions and some of the high-level evidence that informs how recruitment, assessment and selection can be implemented effectively. The analysis draws on the literature reviews, interviews and Investigative Panels to identify areas that appear to be problematic to the effective recruitment of staff within the SHS sector, and to identify opportunities to improve this component of the workforce lifecycle within the SHS sector. Some of the opportunities identified could be implemented now by individual SHS agencies, either as single organisations or in collaboration with other SHS agencies, whereas others require significant changes to policy settings.

5.1 Recruitment

Successful recruitment goes beyond merely attracting more people; organisations also need to attract people with the right knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics to perform in the roles (Minderoo Foundation, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre at Curtin University et al. 2022). Thus, one cannot simply cast a wide net and hope for the best. Instead, it is important to recruit strategically such that jobseekers of higher quality (i.e. those with relevant knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics) are more likely to be attracted. In this section, four different perspectives/avenues/approaches are used to analyse recruitment:

- employer brand

- person–environment fit

- targeted recruitment approaches

- experience of being an applicant.

Targeted recruiting can provide an opportunity to expand the pool of potential employees who are less engaged with the business-as-usual approaches to recruitment.

5.1.1 Employer brand

Just as companies and organisations must seek to build brand awareness among the public about their products and services to attract customers, employers seeking to attract and recruit talent can achieve this by building a strong *employer* brand (Turban and Cable 2003), which may be distinct from its general brand (Gatewood, Gowan et al. 1993). Cable and Turban (2001: 121) were among the first scholars to formalise the concept of 'recruitment equity', being the 'value of job seekers' employer knowledge'. Since their initial work, considerable research has been undertaken to identify the mechanisms by which organisations can strengthen their employer brands (Lievens and Slaughter 2016). Approaches to strengthen employer brands include:

- actions taken by the organisation generally (e.g. advertising products and services, maintaining a social media presence)

- actions taken specifically during recruitment (e.g. showing job candidates a testimonial from a satisfied staff member on a careers webpage)

- actions taken by recruiters (e.g. communications from recruiters to job candidates about the benefits of the role)

- information generated indirectly through media or word-of-mouth (e.g. a recommendation from a friend).

Employer brand strength is driven by jobseekers' familiarity or awareness of an organisation as an employer, the organisation's reputation as an employer and the unique employer images held by jobseekers (Cable and Turban 2001). Brand strength can then determine the extent and nature of job applicant pools, with employers with stronger brands typically attracting more, and higher quality, candidates than those with weaker brands (Chapman, Uggerslev et al. 2005; Collins and Han 2004).

The impact of brand strength – or reputation – on the ability to attract high quality candidates was evident in the Investigative Panels. In some cases, it was negative and for others it was positive, as these panellists explain:

> Maybe it's a regional thing, but organisational reputation can be hard to change in the communities. [This organisation has] been around [for a long period of time]. People have some very fixed ideas about who we are and what we do and how we're managed. We've had a history of some managers that have stayed for a very long time and staff that were employed here for around 20 years. It's very hard for me to change people's opinions of who we are and what we're looking for. And that, you know, I think we missed some good staff because of our organisational reputation. (Panel member, Panel 2)

> we use like Seek, for example, and … [a] recruitment agency just so we can get a broader exposure
> of the service. But it's mostly word-of-mouth and people who know the organisation and the
> reputation and want to come and work with us. (Panel member, Panel 1)

It is likely that organisations in the SHS sector will vary considerably in the degree to which they can draw from their own brand and reputations when seeking to develop their employer brands. For example, larger and more established not-for-profit SHS agencies may garner more national brand awareness and clearer reputations than smaller SHS agencies located in regional centres. However, brand awareness for smaller agencies may still be substantial *within their regional centres* if, for example, they are highly influential within, or familiar to, their local communities. In general, taking a branding approach to improving recruitment outcomes may be less appropriate to smaller organisations or those operating in a niche or specialised service delivery area, unless specific applicant markets can be targeted.

Attracting applicants at all, let alone skilled or qualified applicants, to SHS organisations is extremely challenging. Several interviewees and panel members noted that advertising for jobs on Seek resulted in few if any hits, again exposing the limits of the reach of the sector employer brand.

> We found that LinkedIn is not popular with our sector. In terms of the senior roles, yes, but not for a
> caseworker, not for frontline workers. (Panel member, Panel 3)

> Yeah, we're experiencing the same, advertising on Seek, getting diddly squat. (Panel member, Panel 3)

> we've had a job add up for three months and we just can't attract the actual skill, the level of skill.
> And I think that's because of the amount of money that we can offer. (Panel member, Panel 2)

It is not necessarily in the interests of the sector overall to have individual employers strengthen their employer brands if it only leads to staff from other employers in the sector being 'poached' from one organisation to another. Indeed, members of the Investigate Panels identified poaching as a recruitment practice, and an interviewee discussed their experience of being poached by a personal contact. Poaching can occur when word-of-mouth is a major recruitment channel and when employee pools are small, as people seek or learn about opportunities for better conditions through their networks.

> [My contact] mentioned shifts were better [at the other organisation], and I was working [at my
> current organisation] weekends and doing the same thing again and again, and I liked the way [the
> other organisation] operated. (Interviewee)

> I've also head hunted people from other orgs which may not sit well with some. (Panel member,
> Panel 2)

Sector-level branding

Traditionally, employer brand is usually discussed in relation to individual organisations, as this makes it possible to understand why some organisations are more successful than others in attracting job applicants. While there are likely to be differences between SHS organisations in the strength of employer brand, a theme that emerged consistently in the literature review and panels was that the whole SHS sector employer brand was weak. With the sector itself struggling to attract workers, it may be worthwhile determining whether collective gains for employers in the sector can be realised by assessing and improving brand awareness and reputation at the sector level among jobseekers with relevant knowledge, skills or abilities.

Interviewees noted that the SHS sector, overall, does not have a strong reputation among qualified workers:

> I'd like [the sector] to come across as professional, be well-funded, and that we're not lurching from funding to funding … there is insecurity because we are based on funding. A lot of insecurity. The sector comes across as not professional, it feels 'second-class'. We need to lead the way and shout loudly, not for ourselves, but for the young people. We owe it to the people we work with to move this sector forward, especially now. We're needed now more than ever. (Interviewee)

> The workforce and … the roles in our workforce … how they're perceived by allied health professions or allied human service professions, social workers … that's a really important aspect. It's a fundamental aspect because if we don't change that, then it won't attract the workforce. The workforce will only be seen as a pathway through to something else. (Panel member, Panel 1)

> I think there are many people who may be interested in the [SHS] field, but don't perhaps understand what Youth Workers (in our case) actually do. If we are able to promote this type of profession, which include government promoting the value of what our teams do. (Panel member, Panel 1)

A similar theme emerged in the Investigative Panels. One panel member explained the importance of rebranding to develop a good understanding within the community, including those involved in the funding of the sector, about the value of the sector as a whole. The panel member argued that the SHS sector should be proactive in:

> reshaping the way that we are viewed by the community cause, at the end of the day, [the work done by the sector] … reduces the pressure on health, reduces the pressure on prisons, all of those sorts of things … we should actually have a really big marketing firm working on behalf of all of us [in the sector] to actually change that conversation … rising or elevating the level of [community knowledge about] what our collective organisations do because … you can see you know the value of what you're doing. (Panel member, Panel 1)

In contrast to the challenges that branding may pose for individual organisations, there is an opportunity to investigate the employer brand at the sector level and determine whether collective gains for employers can be realised by improving the brand awareness and reputation of the sector as a whole among jobseekers with relevant knowledge, skills or abilities.

The workforce strategy developed by CHP in Victoria articulates the need for the sector to develop a firmer shared understanding of the benefits of employment in the sector (i.e. positive messaging) and to leverage those benefits to improve the employer brand for the sector as a whole. CHP (2020a) cited concerns that other parts of the community sector had higher profiles than homelessness services and, thus, may be more intuitively appealing to applicants with relevant qualifications or training. In line with this, there have been many calls among scholars and peak bodies for higher education providers to incorporate specialised content relevant to the homelessness sector into curricula. These calls were echoed during the Investigative Panel discussions. Both strategies are likely to improve sector-level employer brand awareness, as they allow people to become more familiar with the nature of the services offered, the type of work undertaken and how the services positively contribute to the community.

Research has demonstrated that corporate social performance and social responsibility messaging have positive effects on employer brands and organisational attractiveness (Rupp, Shao et al. 2013; Turban and Greening 1997; Zhang and Gowan 2012). Thus, messaging around the positive contributions the SHS sector makes to society is likely to raise the profile of the sector; enable it to be viewed favourably by jobseekers; and support the recruitment of individuals with the right knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics to perform the roles. Such a goal will be easier to reach if the sector can demonstrate clear examples of successful outcomes.

5.1.2 Person–environment fit

Another useful perspective for understanding recruitment that has its roots in classical psychology is derived from the notion that behaviour is determined by the joint contribution of personal and environmental factors. The theory of person–environment (P-E) fit suggests that optimal behaviours and outcomes will emerge when there is an alignment between personal and environmental characteristics (Kristof-Brown 2011). In the context of recruitment, broadly, P-E fit can be thought of as the extent of alignment between the characteristics of the jobseeker and the characteristics of the hiring organisation (Kristof-Brown 2011; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman et al. 2005). The fit that a jobseeker anticipates between themselves and a prospective employer is strongly associated with the perceived attractiveness of an organisation as a place to work (Cable and Judge 1996; Uggerslev, Fassina et al. 2012). In practice, while fit and branding seem different at first glance, there is substantial overlap in the implementation of employer branding and fit-based recruitment practices.

P-E fit can be understood in two main ways (Kristof-Brown 2011), supplementary fit and complementary fit, the latter of which can be further broken down into demands-ability and needs-supplies, each of which will be discussed below in the context of findings from the research.

Supplementary fit

Supplementary fit describes the level of similarity between individuals and an organisation. For example, supplementary fit might be determined by the extent to which jobseekers believe they share similar values to an employer (Edwards and Cable 2009) or recognise that an organisation is comprised of 'similar' others. Those candidates perceiving high supplementary fit may expect to have more positive experiences with an organisation, thus making that organisation more appealing as a place of employment (Devendorf and Highhouse 2008; Yu 2014).

CHP (2020a) described the emphasis that many SHS agencies place on attracting applicants who share values with the organisation, and the idea of 'values fit' as an essential selection criterion also emerged during the Investigative Panels. Individual organisations varied in the values that they perceived as being important to the successful delivery of their unique services; however, the importance of shared values between staff members and the organisation was recognised from the point of view of the candidate: '*The value proposition, for workers, is to be able to express and align their values [to those of the organisation], and apply their skills and knowledge*' (Panel member, Panel 1). The alignment of values was also recognised as being important from the point of view of the organisation:

> because if the recruitment [centres] around values and why [an employee is] here and what [they] want to achieve and is aligned to the [values of] organisation … that alignment works really well. (Panel member, Panel 3)

> we're just looking at shaping our interview questions and recruitment, just incorporating things [that] are more along the lines of you know, professional identity and kind of bringing more frameworks into the interview … and then … naturally drawing on what drives people and their own sort of motivating factors and their values as well. (Panel member, Panel 3)

CHP's (2020a) workforce strategy notes that SHS agencies seek to attract applicants who share values with the sector more widely. While individual organisations will likely vary somewhat in their organisational values, where commonality can be found, a sector-level values statement may be a useful tool for alerting potential applicant pools of the values of the employers in the sector. Interviewees and panellists described their vision of shared sector-level values:

> Helping people. Giving back, that altruistic kind of experience. Having the opportunity to support vulnerable people or people when they're at their lowest or their most vulnerable. That's one of the main motivations for people. (Interviewee)

A growth opportunity for the sector would be to promote the SHS sector and roles as professional, allied to other professions. (Panel member, Panel 1)

because a home is a basic human right. (Panel member, Panel 2)

A range of issues with this approach are identified and discussed below. Despite these, the SHS sector may be able to improve its employer brand awareness by developing shared sector-level values and incorporating these into its messaging.

Complementary fit: demands-ability

The two remaining construals of P-E fit describe variants of 'complementary fit', which is the extent to which the needs of one party are fulfilled by the characteristics of the other. From the employer's perspective, 'demands-abilities fit' describes the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics that the employer is seeking to recruit. For example, an employer might require applicants to possess certain tertiary qualifications or line management experience.

The literature reviews and the findings from the interviews and Investigative Panels suggest that attracting candidates with the right skills and experience (i.e. those that can provide good demands-abilities fit) is very challenging for the SHS sector. Further, increasing the diversity of applicant pools (i.e. 'demanding' people with 'other' characteristics) by, for example, increasing the proportions of men, young people, cultural and linguistically diverse groups, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, LGBTIQA+ people and people with lived experiences of homelessness in the SHS workforce was identified by CHP (2020a) as an important priority for ensuring that SHS agencies better represent their client bases. Attracting the requite characteristics often requires targeted recruiting strategies (which are discussed below) that can help overcome the perceived lack of similarity (i.e. poor supplemental fit) that minorities experience.

Attracting potential candidates for demands-abilities fit typically requires an employer to be clear about the skillsets that are needed. Panel members demonstrated their understanding of the importance of ensuring the right fit between employees and the skills required for the role for the success and safety of their programs:

I think the most successful recruiting we've had to date has been with targeting people specifically that have got skills in their history … We actually go out and speak to them personally. (Panel member, Panel 1)

So we have this form which we tick off against our essential criteria and the desirable criteria. We can't find people to match, because there is nobody out there. [We] interviewed for a child support worker this week. We've been trying to recruit for two months and [the candidate] came from an OSH background. And she had absolutely 0 experience, but she was just interested in the role. And we just can't put her into the shelter environment caring for vulnerable children with no trauma informed experience. It would be dangerous, but we literally cannot find anyone else. (Panel member, Panel 3)

Other Investigative Panel members explained that, outside of capital cities, it was not always possible to find a good fit between candidates' skills and those needed for the role due to the small pool of jobseekers. In such cases, the degree of fit with personal characteristics (i.e. personality, attitude), rather than the fit with respect to skills, could be prioritised, the idea being that skills could be developed on the job:

[We] welcome workers who have relevant skills and experience. But in country areas you just don't get the pool of applicants for those kind of roles. So we look more for a particular characteristic that someone might have a type of, someone has genuine empathy, someone that has those qualities we're looking for in a person, rather than necessarily coming with the skills and the qualifications. (Panel member, Panel 2)

Position descriptions and job advertisements are useful documents for clarifying what is necessary; however, some interviewees reported that these documents sometimes understated or 'hid' the complexity of the tasks or did not sufficiently establish expectations about the work. For example:

> I was given a job description, so I knew what the role entailed, but I wanted to know more of the day-to-day working, and what a typical day would look like. (Interviewee)

> I've worked at three homeless shelters, and they had a disclaimer that we need to help the service needs as required – which opens it up to be very broad and ambiguous. (Interviewee)

Indeed, as noted in Chapter 3, the complex and demanding nature of the work is often not well articulated in position descriptions or understood by potential applicants.

Complementary fit: needs-supplies

The other type of complementary fit, 'needs-supplies', takes the jobseekers' perspective and describes the features of the working environment that the jobseeker requires or desires. Examples include a high salary, a convenient location or an active social network (Rynes and Barber 1990). When considering needs-supplies fit, it can be useful to further distinguish between tangible and intangible elements that a role or employer can supply (Lievens and Highhouse 2003). Tangible elements represent the utilitarian attributes that are associated with an employer or a role with an employer. Wages, job security and career advancement are examples of tangible attributes of work that have been identified as being very poorly supported by the SHS sector. For example, as discussed in Chapter 4, sector funding models are known to create conditions that can only support short-term employment opportunities with considerable end-of-contract uncertainty. Thus, employers within the SHS sector have little capacity to offer job security to staff, which disincentivises investments in staff training and development. Nonetheless, research has demonstrated that attractiveness as an employer, especially among higher quality applicants, is determined in part by compensation levels and systems (Cable and Judge 1994; Uggerslev, Fassina et al. 2012; Williams and Dreher 1992). Further, downward pressures on wages within the sector encourages the ongoing use of 'entry-level' roles rather than designing and filling roles, such as senior practitioner, that allow people to develop and demonstrate more advanced skills as they build more experience in the sector (Homelessness NSW, Domestic Violence NSW et al. 2017).

Overall, a major barrier to the effective attraction of staff in the SHS sector is the inability of the sector to satisfy the tangible needs of potential employees compared to other sectors. This problem is discussed at length in Chapter 4. In the absence of these tangible needs being met, and in the further absence of significant policy changes to improve funding security, incentivise investment into staff training and development, and promote career progression, the SHS sector will continue to be crippled in the 'war for talent', as these Investigative Panel members explain:

> competition, particularly around funding. What we're noticing is that well-funded services, particularly federally funded services, are able to offer [better conditions] and they're quite prescriptive around the categories of what they can employ. We're finding we're struggling and losing staff to that as well. (Panel member, Panel 2)

> most of the people in our sector are single mums. And they're doing it tough as workers and having to also manage their families. And they're looking for permanency. So, actually, filling those roles, those shorter term roles can be really challenging as well. (Panel member, Panel 2)

The SHS sector, and the organisations therein, may have more flexibility to meet the less tangible needs of applicants (see Chapter 4 for discussion about the importance of meeting basic psychological needs). For example, the section above on 'supplementary fit' alludes to opportunities for potential employees to express their personal values in the context of organisations that share those values. Other examples of where the SHS sector may have more flexibility than other organisation include opportunities for employees to grow their professional networks and develop relevant transferrable sector-wide skills.

CHP's (2020a) workforce strategy calls for SHS organisations to better articulate these intangible benefits of working in the sector, citing the development of transferrable skills and strong professional networks as examples. However, as noted in the discussion on work motivation (Chapter 4) and work design (Chapter 3), an important psychological need is to develop a sense of mastery over one's tasks. This need will continue to be frustrated so long as the supply of housing is unable to meet the demand:

> If you would like a job where you have daily wins and daily challenges, then this is the job for you. Because it really is up and down – that sense of feeling where someone is housed and moves into their place and [you] can take a deep breath, it's an amazing feeling. That's why you do the job. A house is more than a house. It's more than four walls to people – they spend the first few weeks, months, making it their home. That sense of home and sense of belonging is really a springboard for the rest of their lives. If that's something you feed off/gain pleasure out of then this is 100 per cent the job for you if you don't mind the challenges. (Interviewee)

Drawing on the P-E fit lens can offer insights into forming a general strategy to attract more employees to the SHS sector. Reflecting on the three construals of fit offers clearer implications for recruitment messaging and targeting. For example, identifying the factors that SHS sector employers have in common (e.g. organisational values, personality types or the commitment to social good) may provide a foundation to identify and target the archetypical employee (Rupp, Shao et al. 2013; Zhang and Gowan 2012). Further, identifying where organisations within the sector vary in their characteristics may provide a means to strategically target certain groups and direct those individuals to the organisations that can offer supplementary fit.

The sector may also benefit from building a shared understanding of what it can offer to its staff that employers from other sectors cannot offer as readily. By building a common messaging strategy around the sector's offerings, it may be possible to instil a stronger sense of needs-supplies fit among potential jobseeker pools. For example, Cortis and Blaxland's (2017) review of workforce issues in the NSW community services sector identified professional development opportunities as a strong 'pull' factor for staff; perhaps there are other offerings or opportunities within the SHS sector that can be explored? Our own interviews and Investigative Panels highlighted that housing is a basic need and, thus, the opportunity to be instrumental in providing housing to clients can represent a truly meaningful achievement to many employees. Nonetheless, the drawcard of a fair salary and job security are likely to remain as challenges for the sector unless funding policies can change:

> Continued [professional] development is attractive to potential employees for sure. Flexible working arrangements is also an upcoming requirement for new applicants, and this is hard to provide in SHS services. (Panel member, Panel 1)

5.1.3 Diversifying and targeting recruitment to expand the pool of jobseekers

As described earlier, the SHS sector workforce is female dominated, many of whom are highly educated and were recruited at a young age during their student placements. Additionally, people with lived experience of homelessness are often attracted to work in the sector. Although these sources of personnel are relatively reliable, continuing to draw from them can lead to a homogenous workforce.

Investigative Panel members identified the importance of placements, undertaken as part of vocational education and training or through a tertiary institution, as a major pathway into the SHS sector. It is through these placements that students are introduced to the sector and develop an interest in being employed in an SHS organisation, as the following panellist explained:

> And I think the other thing too is that a lot of our staff come to us, the student placements and actually fall in love with the work they like the variety of it. They like that every day is different. They like the organisation. (Panel member, Panel 2)

However, placements add to the administrative workload of SHS organisations and can be the cause of significant financial stress for students, who typically complete them unpaid:

> The connections with the universities is definitely something that many organisations that I talked to were really keen on. But as has been said, it's really challenging for organisations to take on a large portion of that responsibility without shifting that onto universities. (Panel member, Panel 3)

> I think … it's just outdated to expect people to live in poverty [i.e. undertake work without remuneration] to do a placement. (Panel member, Panel 3)

Yet, an over-reliance on traditional recruitment channels can limit the ability to grow or diversify the overall workforce. To diversify recruitment, it is often necessary to undertake *targeted* recruitment exercises that attract new members from specific, and usually under-represented groups, or from groups with specialised skills or experiences.

A highly targeted recruitment strategy with messaging that can connect more directly with relatively more mature or male jobseekers (groups that are under-represented in the SHS sector workforce) may help enlarge the pool of jobseekers. In general, such an approach can be challenging because, as noted above, applicants tend to be relatively more attracted to organisations where they expect to encounter similar others (Devendorf and Highhouse 2008). Nonetheless, research in targeted recruitment strategies is emerging that may contribute to an increase in employee diversity, with recent studies investigating the effects of messaging and recruiter characteristics on the attraction of mature, female and ethnic minority workers (Hentschel, Braun et al. 2021; Koçak, Derous et al. 2022a; Koçak, Rooman et al. 2022b; Newman and Lyon 2009; Wille and Derous 2017; Wille and Derous 2018).

One panel member highlighted the advantages of recruiting staff from other sectors, which requires a targeted approach:

> if I can at attract and involve people from other sectors, I have more ability to retain those staff and to have them move through the career progression and so I often end up hiring people who don't have a lot of community services experience or if they do, there are people that … are effective in that sense in the field. (Panel Member, Panel 2)

Targeted recruitment strategies can be constructed by drawing from both employer branding and P-E fit theories. For example, the employer image formed by members of certain demographic groups may be systematically different from that formed by members of other groups, and can be shaped by employer messaging and recruiter characteristics (Hentschel, Braun et al. 2021). Perceptions of supplementary fit may also vary by demographic group; for example, men may regard organisations that provide care to others as inherently feminine, and thus may expect a lower level of supplementary fit with an SHS employer than women. Thus, a targeted recruitment strategy could involve identifying ways to signal to men that they are indeed similar to others in the organisation (i.e. that many other men also work in the sector) and will be valued (i.e. the contributions of those men are vital). Such strategies might involve highlighting the different ways the male workforce has contributed to the sector (e.g. showcasing the placement into houses of young men with the support of a male support worker or demonstrating types of work that are important but less stereotypically feminine); ensuring that all audio-visuals used in public-facing materials includes both men and women; and ensuring that the language used in such materials, and especially job advertisements, is gender neutral (Gaucher, Friesen et al. 2011). Editing software such as the 'Gender Decoder' (free software that is based on Gaucher, Friesen et al.'s 2011 study) or 'Textio' (a commercial product) may provide support to recruiters seeking to reduce the use of biased language in job advertisements. Needs-supplies fit perceptions may also be determined by membership in demographic groups and recruiting strategies could be tailored accordingly. For example, some groups may find opportunities to work casually or part-time particularly appealing:

> So when we were recruiting caseworkers … we started something different for casual. Twice a year, we have like a casual pool and we do a group interview and we invite them to the group interview and we actually present on what platform is what the role looks like. And then we have Question Time. So, they actually interview us in the first instance and then if they're still interested after that [we proceed with the individual interview] … We've had good success … It has worked well with casuals. It's worked really well with those people new to the sector and people straight out of TAFE or university. (Panel member, Panel 2)

Interviewees working in remote areas explained that a more localised approach to recruitment has worked better in those areas and has been particularly important for recruiting Aboriginal workers:

> We need to have a more localised approach to recruitment. So we want the local managers details on there, not call this line and you get a talent acquisition team person that lives in Brisbane that does all your phone screening. We really have advocated to try and get that, particularly if you're wanting to increase your Aboriginal employment options. (Interviewee)

Nonetheless, even the most successful targeted recruiting activities will fail to improve the staffing outcomes of organisations if the assessment and selection practices are systematically (whether consciously or unconsciously) biased against those minority groups being targeted. For example, a study conducted in the United States found that the rejection rates at the CV screening stage for applicants with stereotypically black names were higher than those with stereotypically white names, despite the content of the CVs being matched across both sets of names (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). Worryingly, despite the study's age, there seems to have been little improvement since its publication (Quillian, Pager et al. 2017).

One example where bias could be creeping into the selection process in the SHS sector was with respect to values fit. Both our own evidence and that provided by the CHP (2020a) workforce strategy suggested that selecting for 'values fit' was a key priority for the recruitment of new staff. However, we caution that, in practice, values fit is very difficult to evaluate objectively. Though values can be assessed objectively and in a standardise manner via a self-report questionnaire and used as a basis to select for fit (Edwards and Cable 2009), our interviews and panel discussions suggested that psychometric assessment was rarely implemented. Instead, it seemed that values fit was most often judged in a holistic or intuitive sense through interviews, cover letters or scans of social media (Highhouse 2008; Kirk, Wee et al. 2022; Neumann, Niessen et al. 2021).

Unfortunately, when recruiters or hiring managers are left to form subjective judgements, there is the risk that values fit becomes a proxy for 'similarity fit'. Indeed, it is well established that 'like attracts like' (Berscheid and Walster 1969), and thus perceived dissimilarities between a candidate from a minority group (i.e. a group that the SHS organisation is trying to 'grow into') may be attributed to poor 'values fit', with the candidate being rejected. As is discussed in the section below on 'Assessment and selection', the best safeguard against conscious and unconscious bias against minority members during selection is to maximise the degree of objectivity, structure and standardisation contained in an assessment and minimise the use of subjective, unstructured and unstandardised assessments.

5.2 Assessment and selection

Following the attraction of candidates to a role, the next stage of personnel selection is the assessment of candidates. For over a century, organisational psychologists have undertaken extensive research into understanding the effective practice of candidate assessment and selection (Ployhart, Schmitt et al. 2017) and, in conjunction with legal frameworks, have informed current understandings of best practice in assessment in the context of personnel selection. Incorporating best practice into assessment and selection processes will help an organisation maximise its chances of hiring the best candidates and, thus, function more effectively overall. Several key areas of concern, which also present opportunities, are summarised below.

5.2.1 Job analysis

An analysis of all the critical work tasks to be performed within a given role will inform the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics that a potential employee must possess to complete a given role. Capability frameworks such as those developed by Homelessness NSW (2018) and CHP (2019) are extremely useful for analysing jobs, as they provide a common language with which to describe job relevant behaviours across multiple roles, and indeed across the community services sector. For example, many jobs within the SHS sector require direct interactions with clients, and a standardised capability framework can articulate for the whole sector the types of communications that are most appropriate for roles at different levels, or for different client situations.

5.2.2 Assessment tools

There are many tools that employers can use to assess job candidates, with familiar examples being reviews of CVs and/or cover letters, structured or unstructured job interviews, psychometric tests and reference checks. However, it is not often easy for recruiters to know which assessments are most appropriate for a given situation. Extensive research into some of the more widely used assessment types has helped scientists identify those which provide job relevant information that is useful for making better selection decisions (Sackett, Zhang et al. 2021; Schmidt and Hunter 1998). This research, along with other research on human judgement, has consistently demonstrated that decision-making is optimised when the degree of subjectivity and human judgement can be minimised (Grove, Zald et al. 2000; Kuncel, Klieger et al. 2013; Neumann, Niessen et al. 2021). The evidence regarding the effectiveness of different assessment methods has shown that less objective selection methods (e.g. unstructured interviews, number of years of job relevant experience, reference checks, human reviews of CVs and cover letters, and reviews of social media) despite being very popular, are very poor indicators of performance on the job (Cubrich, King et al. 2021; Schmidt and Hunter 1998; Van Iddekinge, Lanivich et al. 2016).

Organisations resort to these subjective methods of assessing job candidates for understandable reasons. They are normative and thus, perhaps, are regarded as expected. Second, they are cheap and accessible (apart from time, it costs nothing to review a CV). Panel members explained how and why they use these subjective measures, including covering letters and social media, to assess a job candidate:

> We always ask for a covering letter, and I think that that's a quite a good screening tool for us. We tend to get quite a bit of information from people through the covering letters as to their value base. (Panel Member, Panel 1)

> using social media actually because I think that gives a pretty good view of the type of person that you're taking on board and often what's been presented to you [during an interview] may not necessarily be the opinions and lifestyle that they may lead. (Panel Member, Panel 1)

Unfortunately, in addition to being poor indicators of job performance, these types of assessments also often lead to biases against minority candidates and would thus hamper efforts to diversify applicant pools. For example, a candidate whose native language is not English may submit a cover letter that seems poorly written, and, as noted above, human evaluations of CVs are also highly biased against minorities (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). Social media reviews are also associated with negative outcomes for minorities (Krings, Gioaba et al. 2021; Van Iddekinge, Lanivich et al. 2016).

By contrast, assessments that are designed to minimise the degree and influence of human judgement, such as structured interviews (Campion, Palmer et al. 1997), mental aptitude tests, job knowledge and situational judgement tests (McDaniel, Hartman et al. 2007) are among the strongest indicators of performance in many different types of jobs. Further, standardised assessments of 'softer characteristics' such as personality, integrity, values and vocational interests (typically assessed with standardised questionnaires), while generally not uniformly strong indicators of performance (Van Iddekinge, Roth et al. 2011), can be good indicators of performance in certain job contexts with respect to certain types of work, or certain types of work activities or competency domains (Bartram 2005; Judge and Zapata 2015; Nye, Su et al. 2017).

The use of psychometric assessments for selection is extremely well grounded in research, with over 100 years of combined research informing the measurable characteristics that are good indicators of future job performance. Nonetheless, it is appreciated that there are barriers to the effective adoption of psychometric assessments, as they require specialist training for access. Accordingly, here we identify two opportunities to substantially improve selection practices: first, by improving the design and level of structure in the job interview; second, by following two recent examples from the medical and teaching disciplines, in which a particular type of assessment – the situation judgement test – was developed.

5.2.3 The job interview

Job interviews, as an assessment tool, can be used to evaluate a range of characteristics (Huffcutt, Conway et al. 2001), including basic personality traits, job knowledge, applied social skills and other skills. Further, the job interview can vary on many dimensions, including level of structure, situational questions vs behavioural questions, virtuality (i.e. face-to-face vs internet-mediated) and synchronicity.

Because of the different forms it can take, and nature of content it can include, it is very difficult to comment in general terms about the effectiveness of interviews as an assessment tool. Nonetheless, many insights into the factors that matter most to interviewing effectiveness have been gleaned from research. One dimension that has garnered a lot of attention is *interview structure*. Highly structured interviews tend to have a 'formal' feel and typically have the following features: all interview questions are based on a job analysis, all candidates are asked the same set of questions, there are no prompts or follow-up questions, there are multiple evaluators, and the evaluators have been trained to understand both the distinctions between interview questions and the behavioural standards that are associated with each possible rating (Campion, Palmer et al. 1997). Unstructured interviews tend to be less formal or procedural. In an unstructured interview, candidates may be asked different questions from other candidates, the interview may take a free-flowing conversation-like format, there may only be a single interviewer, and there may not be clear evaluation standards available to evaluators; instead, the evaluator(s) rely on their intuition.

The research is very clear about the benefits of incorporating higher levels of structure in job interviews. In particular, more structured approaches to interviewing provides recruiters with stronger indicators of a candidate's likely effectiveness in a job (Huffcutt, Culbertson et al. 2014; McDaniel, Whetzel et al. 1994) and can also reduce the prevalence of bias against minority groups (Roth, Van Iddekinge et al. 2002; Sackett, Zhang et al. 2021), when compared to less structured interviews. Further, highly structured interviews also appear to be an antidote to the 'like attracts like' bias described above, and thus may be essential for use among SHS organisations seeking to diversity their employee pools (de Kock and Hauptfleisch 2018; Sacco, Scheu et al. 2003). It is very strongly suggested that SHS organisations are provided with adequate training and resources on how to conduct effective structured interviewing, as this type of assessment is accessible and, if conducted well, one of the most effective assessments available. Indeed, as is discussed below, workforce capability frameworks can provide an excellent foundation for designing appropriate structured interview questions and standardised evaluation criteria.

Another important distinction for job interviews is that which describes types of questions. While any types of questions can be asked during an interview (e.g. job knowledge, questions about one's background), a distinction that is often discussed in the research on interviews is that between situational and behavioural questions. Situational questions pose hypothetical situations and ask the job candidates to articulate how they would respond, whereas behavioural questions ask job candidates to describe how they have behaved in the past in response to a real situation they have experienced. Use of either type of questions appears to be associated with effective interviewing (Levashina, Hartwell et al. 2014), although the behavioural questions are more likely to elicit information about past experiences than situational questions. Indeed, situational questions may be best used when candidates are relatively inexperienced (e.g. recent VET or university graduates) whereas behavioural questions may be most useful when candidates are more experienced (e.g. have a history of community services sector work or lived experience with homelessness).

Our interviews and panel discussions highlighted the importance of the interview, but also the variety in its implementation.

> I tend to prioritise the personality over anything else, so if I can see that they are a person that I feel comfortable with, all the panel, you know that we feel comfortable with that. (Panel Member, Panel 2)

> You know, [someone who] can put us at ease, that we think will help clients feel comfortable and have our good instincts … I ask lots of questions that seek to get an understanding of the candidate's ability to think about their own safety when they're working. (Panel Member, Panel 2)

> it's much better off for us to do a face-to-face interview and from that we could assess … whether they are activists, whether they've got issue with the police or whether they have issues with the [government department]. (Panel Member, Panel 1)

5.2.4 Using capability frameworks to aid recruitment, assessment and selection

In addition to aiding job analyses (see above), workforce competency or capability frameworks can provide a strong basis for identifying job relevant assessments or components of assessments (e.g. questions that are to appear in a structured interview). For example, CHP's (2019) SHS workforce capability framework describes 'listening actively' as a capability relevant to many roles in the SHS, and clearly articulates a set of behaviours that indicate three levels of proficiency (e.g. Foundational: 'Asks open ended questions that allow consumers the opportunity to express themselves'; Leading: 'Expert at working with consumers in complex or challenging situations without expressing any judgement'). The behaviours described within a capability framework could provide the foundation for a selection assessment. For example, an interview panel could ask a job candidate to provide an example of how they had gone about trying to obtain more information about a client's situation. Alternatively, a situational judgement test could be designed that presents a situation for which the appropriate response is to demonstrate the 'listening actively' behaviour (e.g. a client has presented at the SHS organisation clearly in a state of distress: how will the job applicant respond?). In principle, the capability framework could be mapped onto a predetermined set of assessments, with agreed upon standards that describe poor through to excellent performance being applied to job candidates across the sector. The application of a competency model in this way would facilitate more objective and job relevant approaches to assessing job candidates.

The research team's investigations suggested the capability frameworks developed by CHP and Homelessness NSW are not being used extensively by SHS organisations for analysing jobs or choosing assessments for job candidates. We suggest that recruitment and selection practices could be significantly improved by policies that encourage and support the widespread adoption of the capability frameworks as a basis for role analyses, position descripting drafting and the assessment of job candidates. States and territories that have not yet developed capability frameworks for the SHS sector may wish to consult with the two that are already published or other similar frameworks that have been developed for wider community services assessments. A systematic review of competency frameworks undertaken by Bartram (2005) revealed that such frameworks typically 'boil down' to eight key competency domains, comprising 20 main dimensions. While each state and territory will no doubt have some unique features that require some customisation, it is extremely likely that the extant capability frameworks would provide a very good starting point. Thus, we would encourage policy makers to utilise the projects already undertaken in New South Wales and Victoria and would further encourage investment in the adoption and implementation of these frameworks.

5.3 Summary of key findings

Overall, our review of the literature and the findings from the interviews and Investigative Panels have identified the following key problems, which are based on the frameworks and discussions above.

Attracting applicants at all, let alone skilled or qualified applicants, to SHS organisations appears to be extremely challenging. Representatives from some organisations reported being lucky if they could manage to get a single, qualified applicant for advertised positions. Applicants often are recruited via word-of-mouth, following placement exercises and because of lived experience. These sources are likely to continue to be fruitful; however, relying on them will lead to a relatively homogeneous workforce, creating risks for the sector and reducing its ability to diversify. Further, if the pool of workers remains the same size, and merely moves between SHS organisations, the overall functioning of the sector will decline, as resources will be invested in recruiting, onboarding and training the same people across different employers. SHS organisations seeking to diversify their applicant base may need to embark on a specialised, targeted recruiting strategy that considers the needs and expectations of different under-represented groups, and sends appealing signals to members of those groups. Initially, these strategies can be challenging because people are most attracted to groups they perceive as similar to themselves. Selection practices (discussed below) may also need to be adapted to be more inclusive to those from under-represented groups.

Some organisations find that applicants have expectations about the role that do not match some of the realities of what needs to be done, and that some baulk at those activities. Roles in the SHS sector are becoming increasingly complex and challenging, requiring a greater breadth of skills. Employees face alcohol and drug situations, including drug dealers, trauma, domestic violence, police, mental health situations, medical emergencies and so on, sometimes with little support on site. Consequently, staff need to have mental health support skills and social worker skills, and yet these skills are not 'meant' to be part of the job as described in position descriptions and job advertisements, nor are they reflected in the compensation. Job candidates (and non-candidates who might be strong candidates if they were to apply) also appear to have a relatively poor understanding of the nature of the role and what is required. This is attributed in part to VET and university courses not providing sufficient exposure to the sector, meaning students may only encounter the sector via idiosyncratic placement opportunities. Therefore, graduates may either be unaware of the sector, or be aware of it but without a proper understanding of the requirements of the work, which, in any case, tertiary courses are not equipping graduates to deal with.

The salaries offered within the sector are comparatively low, even with penalty rates and salary sacrifice factored in, and especially when considering the skills required to perform in the role. Salary is an important determinant of job application attraction. Further, it is difficult for employers to offer long-time job security to staff because the funding models are short-term, again inhibiting the ability of SHS organisations to attract workers. It is also difficult to provide staff with clear career paths because funding models and competitive tender process encourage the proliferation of cheaper entry-level roles. Similarly, it is difficult to provide allocations for training and development (one of the major drawcards for employees in the sector) because funding is tender-based and incentivised by short-term cost minimisation. Further compound matters, the work can be inherently unsatisfying because there is rarely enough housing, meaning it is not possible for an employee to reach the goal of housing people. Nonetheless, the sector has some levers to pull to attract workers, such as clarifying its positive contribution to society and the opportunity to build networks.

Currently many organisations rely on traditional candidate assessment selection methods, including CV reviews, cover letter reviews, social media screens and interviewing. These approaches are understandable given time and resource constraints; however, they can lead to suboptimal decision-making that can work against the diversification of the workforce. For example, while SHS organisations are keen to select for values fit, the evidence suggests that values fit (or 'culture fit') is a very 'fuzzy' concept that leaves room for subjectivity, which can lead to unconscious biases such as similarity attraction. Two excellent, but potentially underused, workforce capability frameworks have been published by homelessness sector peak bodies.

Based on the analysis in this chapter, the following recommendations are suggested. These mainly relate to structural elements, in particular the funding model:

- clarify the requirements of the roles within the SHS sector

- reconsider funding models and funding levels to enable SHS organisations to invest in their workforces

- provide resources for the SHS sector to invest in upskilling recruitment and selection practices.

There are also opportunities for SHS agencies and the sector to improve recruitment practices through improved sector-level employer brand equity. These recommendations are discussed further in Chapter 6.

6. Policy and practice opportunities

- Work within the SHS sector is complex, requiring a specialised and highly trained workforce. The SHS sector is challenged by workforce issues, including work design, employee motivation and retention, and recruitment. These challenges resonate nationally, although there are some regional and metropolitan differences.

- Meaningful development of the SHS sector workforce will require significant reform to the funding model, an increased supply of social and affordable housing, and workforce training. These changes require state- and national-level government commitment.

- The current competitive funding model undermines the effectiveness of the SHS sector workforce in multiple ways: funding is not congruent with need, funding cycles are too short, the sharing of resources and skills is discouraged, development and training are compromised, and staff career pathways are difficult for organisations to develop. The way in which funding is distributed within the SHS sector has the most capacity to shape the effectiveness of the workforce.

- Greater investment in social and affordable housing as well as training and development within the SHS sector will support employee motivation and retention and improve recruitment into the SHS sector workforce.

- Organisations within the SHS sector are working effectively within their capacity to be employers of choice, but are constrained by structural-level issues that affect workforce effectiveness.

In Australia, individuals and households that are homeless, or are at risk of homelessness, are supported by a broad service system of federal and state government and local place-based stakeholders, including specialist homelessness services (Spinney, Beer et al. 2020). The SHS sector has been challenged by several key issues for at least the last decade. These include the increasing complexity of the work being undertaken, the ability to attract and recruit new employees into the sector, and the ability to motivate and retain existing staff. This research has examined the workforce lifecycle – that is, the design of the work, the attraction of staff and the motivation of staff – to provide a robust evidence base to suggest changes within organisations and broader systems that would enable the sector to build and retain an effective workforce.

As discussed in the previous chapters, the Investigative Panels and interviews revealed a range of creative ways in which organisations are responding to workforce challenges at an organisation or regional level. A strong theme that emerged from the panel deliberations and interviews is that sector workforce development at scale requires broader, system-level reforms. Panellists and interviewees identified three major system-level issues as major concerns for the sector and, consequently, as top priorities for government-led reform. These include the sector funding model, the significant shortfall of affordable housing across Australia, and formal avenues and opportunities for sector training. Building on the issues raised in the previous chapters, this chapter begins by reiterating panellists' perspectives on how these system-level issues are impacting the sector.

The chapter then outlines key priorities for reform, starting with system-level changes that require state and federal government support. Second, recommendations for strategies and actions that organisations can take to further their ongoing efforts to support and develop the SHS workforce are outlined. However, it is evident that the effectiveness of changes at an organisational or sector level will be hampered in the absence of structural or policy-level change. That is, while improvements in organisational practices should be supported by policy, any such changes are likely to have only a small impact when the more fundamental structural issues remain.

6.1 Implications of the funding model for the SHS sector workforce

The discussions in the Investigative Panels and interviews revealed a range of creative ways in which organisations are responding to workforce challenges at a subregional and organisational level. However, against this, a single and strikingly consistent theme resonated across the country: while NGOs provide services on the ground, it is the state that structures their work – and workforce – through the funding model. It is the broad design of this model that has the greatest implications for the sustainability of the workforce within the SHS sector; therefore, reform of this model represents a significant opportunity to enhance workforce capacity in the SHS sector.

Competitive approach to funding distribution

Panellists explained that, within the context of overall funding scarcity, the competitive funding model encourages organisations to under-cost services, which has significant workload implications:

> the race to the bottom that is, you know, [the] push by the funding models for most of these services where if you can do it cheaper … you get the job. So that benefits employers who might not be as worker friendly. And so we see funding being removed from places where there are really good work practices and going to places where there's not so much. (Panel member, Panel 2)

This pressure to reduce service costs was seen as completely counter to positive workforce development, encouraging underemployment or underpayment relative to skill and job responsibilities across the industry, as well as putting pressure on individuals to take on more work. Under this model, funding does not supply the resources needed to deliver adequate services to help prevent homelessness and/or prevent relapse into homelessness.

The professionalisation of the SHS sector has required the addition of administrative personnel to support front-facing staff and the increasing reporting requirements. These roles are also not being reflected in service agreements. In a context of under-resourcing, administrative duties can detract from service delivery, with implications for service quality and worker morale:

> The model itself needs to be reformed to include all this high duty admin stuff that we've had to do, because this whole management fee being 17.5–20 per cent isn't actually realistic anymore. (Panel member, Panel 2)

Collaboration among organisations is discouraged

The research evidence base demonstrates that addressing homelessness requires system-level change, including the capacity for SHS organisations to work together. In this vein, one panellist argued that collaboration among multiple providers delivering specialist homelessness services is necessary to create the practice and resource conditions required to end homelessness. However, this systems approach and the collaboration underpinning it are at odds with the way SHS agencies are funded. The panellist observed:

> First of all, our funding models are usually constructed around individual work. So even though we would all have the interest in the collective and collaborative and social change aspect of it, that's very rarely in our contract. (Panel member, Panel 3)

Despite differences in views about alternative approaches, panellists were generally critical of the competitive tendering model, which encourages organisations to bid for services to be delivered as cheaply as possible and, in doing so, encourages competition rather than cooperation with similar organisations. There was agreement that the competitive funding model is counterproductive to workforce development and organisational efforts to support worker wellbeing and job satisfaction.

Funding timeframes and timing of contract renewal

Panellists and interviewees articulated significant concerns regarding short-term funding contracts for SHS programs and their implications for both retaining excellent staff and recruiting new staff. It was noted that decisions around whether such contracts would be renewed were often made too close to the end of contracts to provide security for staff. As funding timeframes approached their end, uncertainty around future funding could be a catalyst for workers to leave their organisation or the sector. This loss of experienced staff was seen as highly inefficient: '*the minute people leave you go back to square one, and then you're training up because all the corporate knowledge is gone*' (Panel member, Panel 1).

The insecurity and precarity of funding time frames is particularly problematic for recruitment in some specialist areas like domestic violence. Often, potential employees are women trying to manage families and they are looking for permanent positions, an option not easily achieved in a short-term contract environment:

> having the short-term contracts and funding contracts too really has limited us in terms of being able to attract staff, because most of the people in our sector are single mums. And they're doing it tough as workers and having to also manage their families. They're looking for permanency. So actually filling those roles, those shorter term roles, can be really challenging. (Panel member, Panel 2)

These areas of negative impact on the SHS sector represent significant opportunities to enhance workforce capacity, better support workers and improve performance and wellbeing among SHS staff. Future refinements of this funding model under the NHAA should be seen as an opportunity to demonstrably enhance the capacity of the SHS workforce. The Productivity Commission (2022: 146) says the next NHHA should be '*accelerating the shift to longer term contracts for homelessness service providers, and offering more flexible and, where appropriate, funding for homelessness support that is not time limited*'. This echoes earlier observations that stressed the importance of long-term funding contracts to SHS organisations as a means of providing greater employment security for the SHS workforce (Cortis and Blaxland 2017).

Available funding does not match need

The funding provided through the NHHA is massively incongruent with need. The Productivity Commission (2022: 13) recently concluded that the distribution of NHHA funding is based on '*outdated data*' (from the 2006 Census) and is based on the size of the population, not need. Indeed, a 2022 Queensland Government submission to the Productivity Commission went so far as to argue that:

> However, the overall NHHA funding divided among states and territories increases only with indexation. *The preservation of separate funding streams from former agreements and their distinct calculation methods in the NHHA bears no relationship to housing and homelessness need in each state and territory.* For example, in real terms, the NHHA provided no additional funding for housing and homelessness, despite homelessness increasing by 14 per cent between the 2011 and 2016 Censuses. (Queensland Government 2022: 12)

A funded workforce development strategy

Panellists argued that the sector needs a funded workforce development strategy in addition to increased funding to address the negative outcomes described above. Some panellists saw a need for a workforce development strategy linked to the NHHA:

> There is that need for a very clear workforce development plan aligned with a recommissioning process and they need to be done in parallel. And that's not happening at the moment in WA. (Panel member, Panel 1)

A workforce development strategy would provide an important foundation for examining and addressing workforce issues within the SHS sector.

6.1.1 Lack of affordable and social housing

It was clear from the panel deliberations that failings in the broader housing system are also having very significant negative impacts on the sector. The lack of social and affordable housing in all locations, but particularly regional locations, was found to impact upon the motivation, retention and recruitment of SHS employees. The lack of housing not only affects the services the sector can deliver for clients but also the capacity of SHS agencies to house the staff employed to deliver such services.

Affordable housing for clients

As panellists explained, for staff, the inability to achieve a key measure of their role has a profound impact on their motivation and, ultimately, their retention in the SHS sector:

> No housing [to offer clients] can be pretty demoralising for staff when there is just nothing out there. (Panel member, Panel 2)

> it's taking so long to get people housed [in this non-metropolitan region], which then, you know, overflows into the frustrations coming from workers and clients. (Panel member, Panel 1)

This can be compounded where workers have closer connections and interactions with clients:

> we can only do so much in our roles and we can't miraculously have a house just up here. So you can do so much with the client to get them ready for a house … but the fact that they haven't actually been able to get a house really makes it look like, 'well, have you done anything for me, really? I'm still not living in a house …' And they see these clients in their local supermarkets. (Panel member, Panel 2)

This was seen as another resource limitation within the sector that is contributing to burnout:

> and that it's just this pattern of despair for the people that we're seeing over and over … there isn't a housing solution that meets their need … I think getting no outcomes is a real burnout … [and] you know constantly it's about have forms being filled in the administrative data, the burden of administrative data that doesn't actually get a house anyway. (Panel member, Panel 3)

Affordable housing for staff

Lack of affordable housing for SHS staff themselves was also raised. Particularly in regional areas, SHS agencies explained that the lack of affordable housing is negatively impacting their ability to recruit staff, particularly where there is a resource boom:

> unfortunately, housing is a big challenge … [W]hen we have advertised for jobs, we're really looking for people that have got existing accommodation in [regional city] or in our surrounding satellite communities. (Panel member, Panel 1)

> You've got services out there with vacancies that they can't fill simply because our people can't afford the $2,000 a week rent and they don't have a home … And that's enormous in terms of skills and capacity. And it's often the regions where they have the most need. (Panel member, Panel 1)

6.1.2 Training and development

Staff in the SHS sector are required to work with people who have a range of needs that are not being satisfactorily met by other health and social service providers. Clients present with significant needs and meeting them requires a highly skilled workforce. Panellists demonstrated a shared understanding of the importance of training and development. Organisations that had been able to secure fully funded training opportunities for staff saw significant changes in staff, not only in personal skills development but also in terms of building strong networks among co-workers. The following was stated in relation to a group of staff being funded to undertake diplomas in community services:

> So they do only one morning a week and I think that morning session for those guys is not just about their diploma. They have a really good catch up. It is like a team-building session. (Panel member, Panel 2)

The capacity of the SHS sector to ensure that staff develop or maintain the skills required to provide the services is hampered by:

• insufficient funding for training and development, which, even when it is provided, does not cover the actual costs incurred

• formal education pathways through TAFE and university not meeting the increasingly specialised needs of the sector, with new recruits being unaware of what the job entails or being insufficiently skilled

• student placements becoming a less dependable recruitment pathway.

Student placements have traditionally been an important avenue through which to introduce potential new employees to the nuances in the sector; however, over the last five years, this has become a less effective recruitment pathway, as students readily identify the remuneration gap between the SHS sector and other community services.

As mentioned, funding does not always cover the full cost of on-the-job training and professional development. For example, as one participant observed, the cost of having staff off the frontline while they participated in training is often not covered. The participant explained that, while training was important for both skills and career development (and job satisfaction), enabling such training without funding constituted a significant extra pressure on the rest of the workforce:

> And you know the people do want to grow and learn as well in their job and there's capability to do it to a degree. But then how do you [extend] them … and encourage them to do other things. So I mean, I have supported some staff to go to university … But you know the back end of that is that it's been a real pressure on the [frontline staff] while those staff aren't working. Because they're studying, so you know you have got to balance your workforce. It's not just the one person, it's your whole workforce and how you balance the work across your workforce as you try and keep people motivated and wanting to do the job and not burn out because they feel like they're moving and growing and doing different things. And if you can't provide that in the workplace, you've got to provide it somewhere else. (Panel member, Panel 3)

Participants from organisations operating in remote areas explained that they were rarely able to recruit people with existing appropriate qualifications. In practice, they tended to hire based on aptitude, communication skills and knowledge of local communities, and then to train new recruits for the role, further demonstrating the need for better funding:

> The majority of my staff [were] employed with no qualifications, with the aim to actually get them qualified as part of the [onboarding] process. (Panel member, Panel 2)

Panellists explained that access to training between regional and metropolitan service providers needs to be carefully considered, particularly when designing training days or modules. One panellist raised the example of a series of training modules rolled out by the WA Mental Health Commission as a positive and potentially replicable example. The panellist emphasised that modules were designed for both face-to-face and online delivery, which helped to enable access across metro and regional areas (Panel member, Panel 1).

Interestingly, one panellist pointed out that training opportunities can go both ways between government and SHS agencies. They saw value in schemes that gave people working in different government departments the opportunity to spend time with SHS organisations in various areas, especially regional ones. They envisioned this as occurring in the form of short traineeships to gain grounded knowledge of the SHS sector and its challenges (Panel member, Panel 2).

Panellists pointed out that formal education is just one pathway into the sector. However, with the work becoming increasingly specialised, they saw value in tertiary education institutions offering more specialist formal training (e.g. in areas such as youth work) but they felt they had limited capacity to impact program decisions and offerings. While some SHS sector panellists reported having conversations with TAFE and university program directors about the changing workforce sector needs, they did not feel able to impact program design or offerings, recognising that programs can take a long time to implement and to change. They also recognised that decisions about program offerings reflected perceptions of demand (Panel member, Panel 2).

Many organisations represented in the Investigative Panels and interviews play a direct role in formal workforce training by taking TAFE and university students for fieldwork and practice placements, and others were looking to do so in future. Overall, student placements were viewed as an important training opportunity and potential pathway to recruitment:

> [W]e've been discussing approaching universities to offer their students practical placements with us and with the hope of creating a pathway to employment with us. But that's a longer term investment. (Panel member, Panel 3)

Placements were seen as having the capacity to '*inspire people to want to be [in the sector]*' (Panel member, Panel 1). They were also regarded as an important opportunity for students who might go on to work in government and or other areas of community welfare support to gain in-depth understanding of the SHS sector and its key challenges:

> we've been taking … Masters students in social work and really just having them there to see what we do and not to just do that government sector placement has been really interesting for them to see maybe some of the challenges that you have in the sector. (Panel member, Panel 1)

However, several panellists pointed out that, despite having successfully retained students following placements in the past, this had become a less effective recruitment pathway over the last five years. In both Western Australia and New South Wales, panellists attributed this change to increased job opportunities for graduates (Panel member, Panel 2), as well graduates' awareness of the different levels of pay on offer. As one panellist explained, placements can get students excited to work in the sector '*until they realise what they're going to get paid*' (Panel member, Panel 1).

6.2 Policy changes to support workforce development

In this section, we discuss the broader system-level, or policy-level, changes that are needed to support SHS organisations and the sector as a whole in building and maintaining workforce capacity, capability and career pathways nationally. All the recommendations are actions that could be undertaken by the Commonwealth and/ or state and territory governments. The direct flow-on effects of these recommendations for the sustainability and development of the SHS workforce in the areas of work design and staff motivation, retention, attraction and recruitment are shown in Table 4.

6.2.1 National Housing and Homelessness Agreement

- The NHHA strongly influences how the workforce operates, and future refinements or iterations of this agreement should be seen as an opportunity to demonstrably enhance the capacity of the SHS workforce.

Funding distribution

- The competitive funding model should be reconsidered to encourage collaboration between organisations, recognise the level of work being undertaken, and allow SHS agencies to respond to the needs of their local community by expanding specialist areas as required.

- Funding should be deliberately targeted at increasing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD workforce within the sector, including resources for additional supports and opportunities for these workers.

- The considerable discrepancy between job security and career progression opportunities in the public and non-profit sectors of homelessness should be closed by supporting the sector to mirror some of benefits available to staff in government positions (e.g. higher remuneration, job security and career progression opportunities such as the creation of leadership roles).

- Funding agreements need to recognise that SHS is an essential service and that there will be an ongoing need for it in the future.

- Funding cycles need to be extended.

- Lead times between contract renewals or new funding commitments and the commencement of programs need to be communicated more efficiently to allow SHS agencies to retain/recruit and/or train staff.

- Where contracts are not renewed with one SHS agency and moved instead to another, staff no longer funded should have priority employment options with new providers.

- Funding distribution should allow for dedicated funding for training and development to support career progression.

- Funding must recognise placed-based delivery costs (e.g. regional) as well as for different client groups.

- Funding targets need to be outcomes based.

Service agreements need to reflect the real cost of service delivery

- Service agreements need to close the gap between contract costs and the price of delivering the services. Multiple panellists from SHS agencies referred to the need to '*quadruple*' sector funding. At the most basic level, panellists explained that '*an injection of funds*' is needed to '*actually meet the demand of the services*' (Panel member, Panel 2).

- The funding model needs to factor in the costs associated with providing training and development for staff to maintain contemporary SHS sector requirements.

- The funding model needs to factor in the costs associated with growing levels of administration and reporting requirements by revising the management fee.

Real service delivery costs should be benchmarked

- An important first step in addressing chronic underfunding in service agreements is an accurate and up-to-date assessment and benchmarking of *real* service delivery costs.

- These should be place-based and take into account the challenges experienced by those in rural and remote areas.

- Benchmarking should differentiate between the service delivery costs for different client groups (e.g. youth vs adult services, domestic violence services).

- The real cost of operating safely (e.g. working in pairs where required) must be included.

Funding to be based on accurate demand data

- Commonwealth funding needs to be based on recent data and updated regularly. States would need to match the changes in funding relative to demand.

A funded workforce development strategy

- The workforce development strategies summarised in Chapter 2, published in Victoria, New South Wales and Tasmania, provide sound actions that are appropriate given the current evidence on recruitment, selection and retention of employees. These offer a foundation for other states seeking to establish strategies for their own jurisdictions.

- Inclusion of KPIs that take account of workforce capacity, sector attraction and worker wellbeing (e.g. number of skilled applicants applying for advertised jobs or recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and CALD workers).

- Support the sector to innovate and create programs proactively for their communities.

- Panellists saw opportunities for a funded workforce development strategy to support the development of a more culturally diverse workforce as well as better support for workers with lived experience of homelessness, housing precarity and/or domestic violence.

- Workforce development strategies need to be state based, but centred on a national structure, to recognise the nuanced challenges and successful approaches within different areas, particularly remote areas vs metropolitan regions. As one regional panellist explained, '*[centralised programs] just [don't] fit with all regions and all services*' (Panel member, Panel 2). This would draw in the extensive local knowledge of the sector.

6.2.2 Greater investment in social and affordable housing required

- Significant investment in affordable housing and crisis accommodation for client groups, as well as intermediate forms of affordable housing for sector workers themselves, is required to support an effective SHS workforce. As one interviewee argued: '*I think government investing in regional [areas] is probably one of the biggest things that need to happen*' (Interviewee).

6.2.3 Sector training and development support

- Provision for ongoing training once staff are employed as well as continued clinical supervision.

- Funding for training and development needs to cover the actual costs incurred by the organisation.

- Access to training between regional and metropolitan service providers needs to be carefully considered, particularly when designing training days or modules.

- Formal education providers (e.g. TAFE and university) need to be aware of the increasingly specialised needs of the sector, assist students to understand what work within the SHS sector entails and consult with the sector to ensure that the correct skills are being developed.

- To reduce the impact on SHS service providers, placements should be arranged with what fits best for the organisation, rather than the university or TAFE (e.g. not necessarily study periods).

- Recognition that undertaking formal education may be challenging or prohibitive for financial reasons and that this may be exacerbated while undertaking placements. Subsidised education costs and or paid practical training could potentially address this challenge: '*it's just outdated to expect people to live in poverty, to do a [student] placement*' (Panel member, Panel 3).

Table 4: The impact of system-level changes on the SHS workforce

Recommendations	Actions	Work design	Motivation and retention	Recruitment and attraction
Funding distribution	• Longer funding timeframes for service agreements • Longer lead time between service agreements • Funding for Aboriginal and CALD workforce development • Place-based funding recognising regional challenges • Job security to match government positions • Career progression pathways supported by funding and training • Encourage cooperation among SHS organisations	• Increase opportunity to design sustainable roles for staff • Reduce intolerable staff demands • Skills and knowledge better matched to industry requirements • Cultural skills and knowledge brought to sector • Work designed to suits service delivery • Increase in mastery • Enable longer term workforce planning	• Reduced risk of losing staff • Increased financial security • Increase motivation • Likely to retain staff for longer • Empower staff, increase autonomy, reduce staff turnover • Increased capacity to offer career progression opportunities to Aboriginal and CALD workers	• Jobs in the sector more attractive to prospective employees • Study/training opportunities make positions/working in the sector more attractive • Broaden potential applicant pool • Study/training opportunities make positions/working in the sector more attractive • Greater prospects for career development and sustainability within the sector, again improving attractiveness
Service agreements reflect real service delivery costs and are benchmarked	• Funding in service agreements increased to reflect demand/real service delivery costs • Funding to reflect real scale of administrative tasks/reporting requirements related to funding • Benchmarking of service delivery costs across different specialist areas	• Make pay commensurate with work tasks and responsibility by reducing incentive to misclassify • Caseload does not contribute to burnout • Reduce intolerable demands • Enable staff to focus on service delivery	• Increased opportunity for career progression • Pay position commensurate to skills/workload	• Increased capacity to hire staff according to need • Jobs in the sector more attractive with more competitive pay and manageable workload tailored to specialist skills
Training and development	• Dedicated funding for training • Offer paid placements as part of formal education • Develop and expand degree and certificate programs in specialist areas • Coordinated approach to placements with workload recognised in funding	• Better matching of skills and role • New workforce has appropriate skills and experience • Reduce supervision demands on staff	• Improved satisfaction of the need for competence, improving motivation	• Inspire people to want to work in the sector • Address financial barriers to training for the sector • Increase recruitment opportunities • Increase labour pool for specialist areas
Investment in social and affordable housing	• More investment in social housing and crisis accommodation for clients • Investment in affordable housing for sector workforce	• Improvements to feelings of mastery, tolerable demands	• Improvements to job satisfaction, higher levels of retention	• Sector more attractive when workers have capacity to successfully house clients and demonstrate impact • Organisations able to attract workers from outside the regions

Source: Authors.

6.3 Practice change to support workforce development

By and large, the research found that SHS agencies are working effectively within their capacity to be employers of choice, to motivate staff, to attract staff from a very limited recruitment pool, and to manage the increasingly complex nature of the work required, which crosses over multiple areas, such as community service, health and justice.

Several recommendations have been made regarding the changes that SHS agencies could make to improve the effectiveness of their workforces. However, these organisational-level recommendations are provided with the disclaimer that unless system-level changes are implemented, the effects will be limited – an observation that further emphasises the importance of policy-level changes in supporting an effective workforce in the SHS sector.

- **Work design:** At the organisational level, there are opportunities to improve the work design such that employees are empowered and their needs and capacities are met. This could be achieved by:

    - reducing work demands where practicable, especially extraneous administrative tasks that could be completed by a non-frontline worker

    - providing training (tertiary and on-the-job) that better prepares students for the diverse and complex role

    - providing relational resources and opportunities for job crafting.

- **Motivation and retention:** There are opportunities to improve worker motivation and retention through incentive and performance management structures that would lead to the optimal use of the funding provided. At the organisational level, SHS agencies could:

    - share resources and provide more career pathways for staff, which would help with building skills within the sector (including exchange of knowledge), external supervision and staff retention

    - focus on longer term targets and relieve managers from spending too much of their time on reporting and applying for funding.

    The latter would free up time for managers to adopt a more participative style of leadership to empower and engage staff, which would further improve services and cull turnover.

- **Recruitment and attraction:** Organisations within the SHS sector have opportunities to improve their recruitment practices; however, doing so will require additional resources. Such strategies can include:

    - diversifying applicant pools (e.g. increasing the number of applications from men, mature workers and workers from other under-represented groups) by investigating targeted marketing and recruitment strategies while ensuring selection processes are not biased against these groups

    - investing in the employer brand or cooperating with other similar organisations to improve the overall brand of the sector as a great place to work

    - adopting a generalised workforce capability framework to analyse and describe roles and design selection systems.

    Such frameworks offer a basis for a shared understanding of the relevant knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics of employees within the SHS sector. Two such capability frameworks, developed in Victoria and New South Wales, are already in a ready-to-use state.

6.4 Final remarks

The SHS sector workforce has been challenged by many factors, including increasing job demands and job complexity, difficulties in attracting new workers and sustaining the motivation of workers to ensure they remain within the sector long-term. These issues have been identified as challenges for at least the last decade. Workforce strategies have been created in three states with the view of looking within the SHS sector to find ways to improve the effectiveness of its workforce. Such strategies provide sound guidance for good workplace practice. The discipline of organisational psychology provides insight into the 'human' side of these challenging by providing an evidence base to inform the factors that help attract workers into a sector, and how to sustain those workers' sense of wellbeing and motivation. Indeed, though there was some opportunity to improve, it was found that many organisations in the sector involved with the research were implementing some evidence-backed practices to sustain their workforces. Nonetheless, intervening at the organisational level has its limits, and many of the pressures placed on the workforce can be traced back to systemic factors relating to the volume of resources the sector can access and how those resources are allocated. While there is a clear need for funding to the SHS sector to be benchmarked against current demand and, therefore, increased, more important is the way in which this funding is distributed to the organisations delivering the services. Rethinking the way in which funding is allocated within the SHS sector has the most capacity to shape the effectiveness of the workforce.

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