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The forgotten frontline: Workplace trauma in SHS

"We are the frontline—but we're the forgotten frontline. We're the last stop. We work with the people who have no one—no family, nowhere to stay. They're sleeping rough, in cars, on trains. It's incredibly hard. And the hardest part? We don't have any houses to put them in."

Deb Batterham
with, Emma Barnes, Chris Hartley, Kathleen Flanagan, Catherine Robinson, Piret Veeroja, Jess Mackelprang

Australian Homelessness Conference, Darwin, 7th – 8th October, 2026

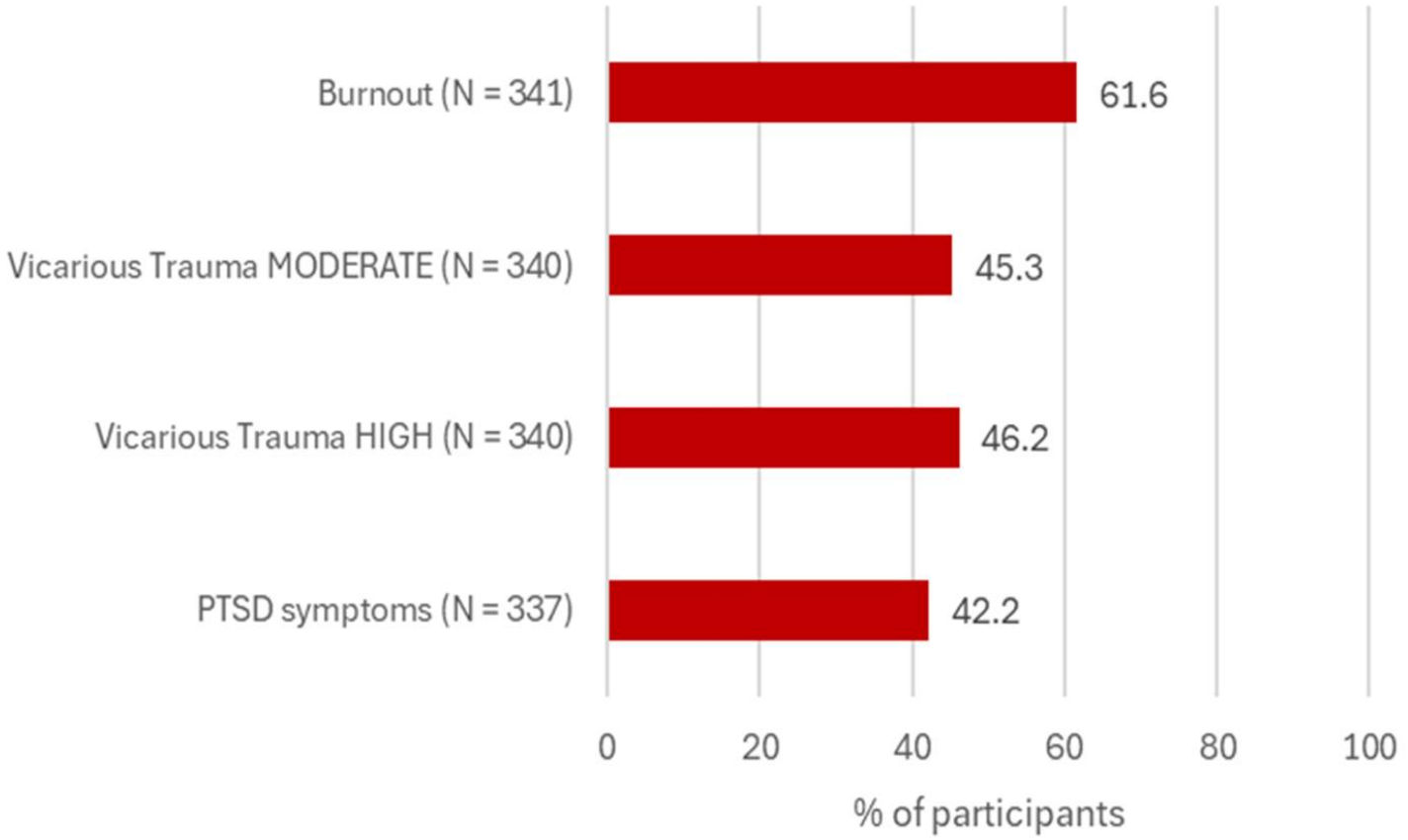
Workplace trauma?

- Workplace trauma arises from direct or indirect exposure to traumatic events, situations or information as a result of a persons' work, and the consequences of this exposure.

- Exposure could be to a one-off event or more likely a series of events that have a cumulative impact.

- An umbrella term incorporating a range of terms used in the literature

Workers across the sector are struggling



"I was ruminating a lot on that stuff and leaning on informal supports quite a bit. Friends and my partner. Through to losing sleep at times, and having stress and anxiety symptoms on the weekends: gut pains, trouble sleeping, just not being able to wind down."

"In the past month I've had a number of staff I used to supervise call – saying this is untenable. I don't even supervise them anymore – they don't have that relationship at work for them to seek that support, with someone with the clinical expertise to help unpack the experience they had in the workplace. Some of them have thoughts of self-harm, some are acting on it."

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What causes harm to frontline workers?

- Working with people experiencing homelessness in distress with unmet needs
- Organisational issues
- Sector issues
- Systemic factors

Working with people experiencing homelessness in distress with unmet needs

- Hearing details of trauma -including abuse and torture (99%)
- 78% have had a client die
- Client suicide attempts, family violence, overdose, child abuse and neglect… the list goes on
- Most (95%) experienced threats to kill or harm them or their families
- 86% of frontline workers have been concerned for their physical safety at work

Regular exposure: *"I would say, that threshold of hitting a duress alarm, 'I need help now' in the office, happens every two days. But we also have a bunch of other sites. So, I'm getting alarms from every site across the state. We only have [<10] sites, but definitely there's an alarm that goes off every day somewhere."*

Despair: *"Knowing that I can't help you in a system that can't help people. Those repeated experiences of despair are soul destroying. You're trying to help someone who is equally experiencing despair."*

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Organizational/sector wide issues

- Overwork and understaffing
- Insecure funding
- Staff shortages and high staff turnover
- Psychosocial hazards
  - Lack of or poor supervision
  - Bullying and harassment
  - Poorly managed organizational change
  - Isolated work.

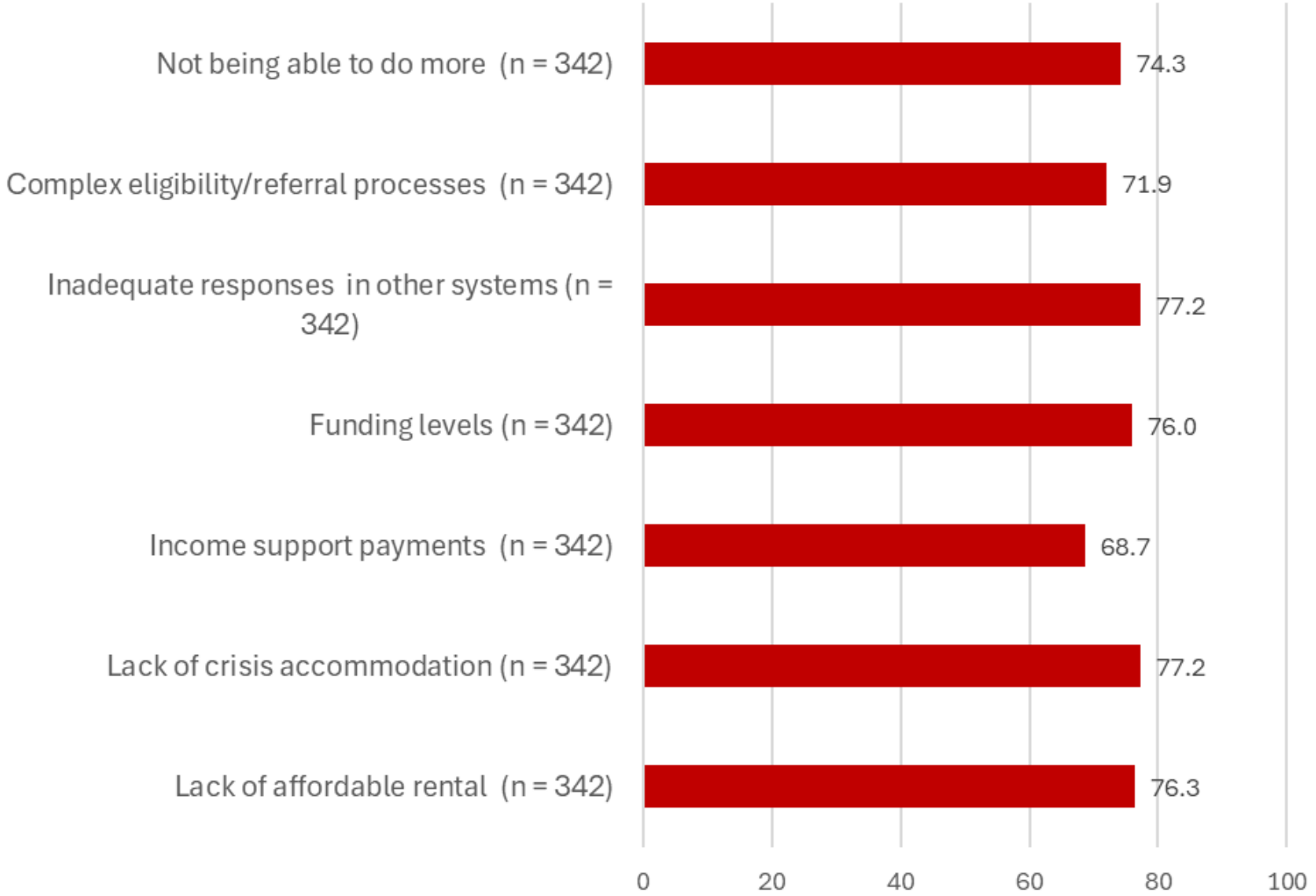
Overwork: *they're …putting all this pressure on targets, but they're just dividing targets amongst the workers that they deign to employ. We have [staff] vacancies that go unaddressed for months and months on end, and depending on who your team leader is, you might just be expected to pick up the slack and continue meeting a program KPI. That's messed up. We need safety nets against that.*

Under staffing: We could have 10 more staff and we'd still be struggling—but it would make a huge difference … We've got a waiting list now, with each worker carrying around 25 clients … We've got around 80 unallocated clients—that's 80 men waiting for a case worker, and all of them are homeless.

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Systems trauma (Kerman et al 2022)



"Clients yell and scream at us all the time — that doesn't traumatise me at all. I know they're not yelling at me; they're yelling at the system. And honestly, I'd love to yell and scream at the system too. I get it."

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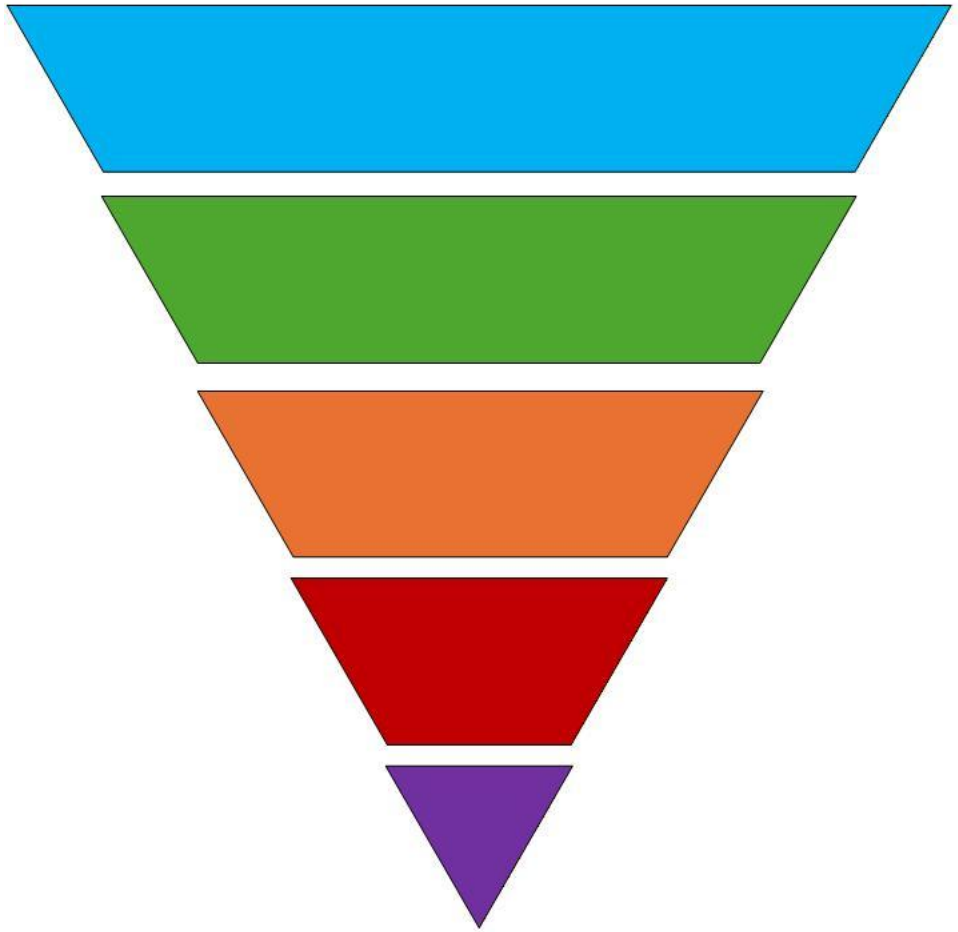
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The agenda for change –more than training and lunchtime yoga



- Reducing the risk
- Reducing exposure
- Physical changes to workplaces
- Policies, procedures and practices
- Improved supports to manage exposure

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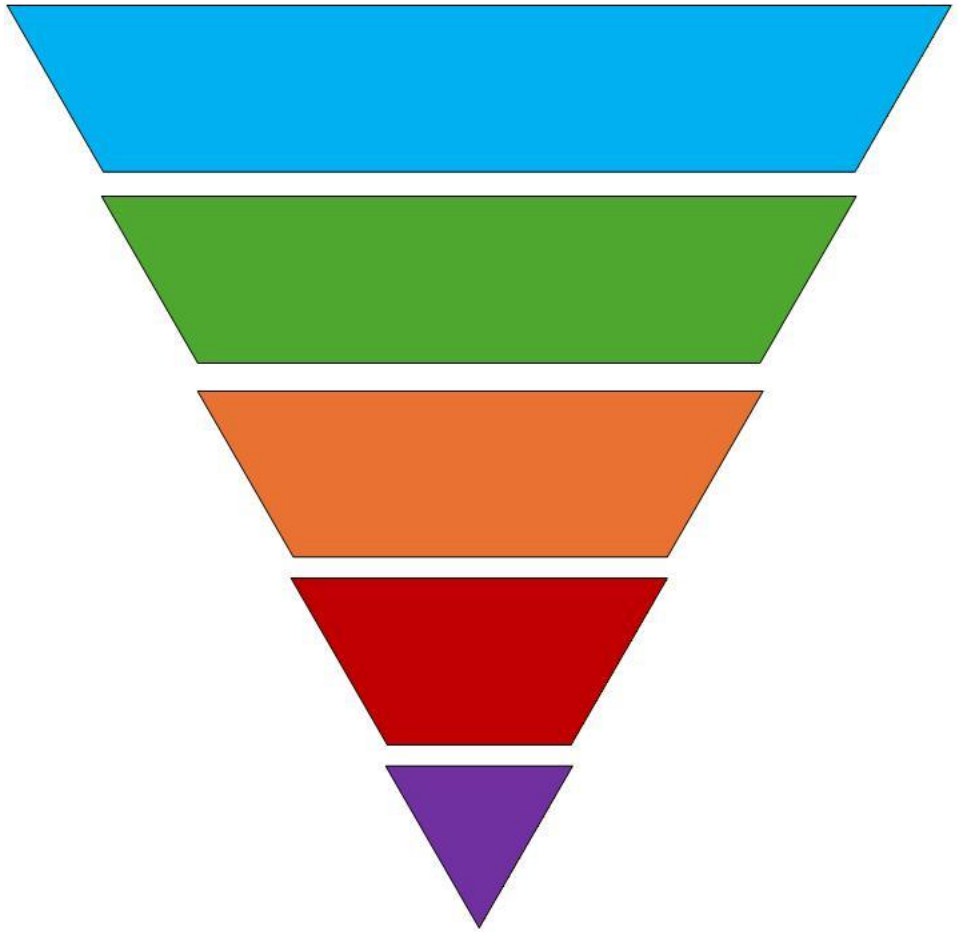
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The agenda for change – managing exposure



- Centrally provide EAPs, ensuring expertise in homelessness work, capacity for ongoing support from the same counsellor, and longer periods of support
- Resource peer-support networks for frontline workers

Improved supports to manage exposure

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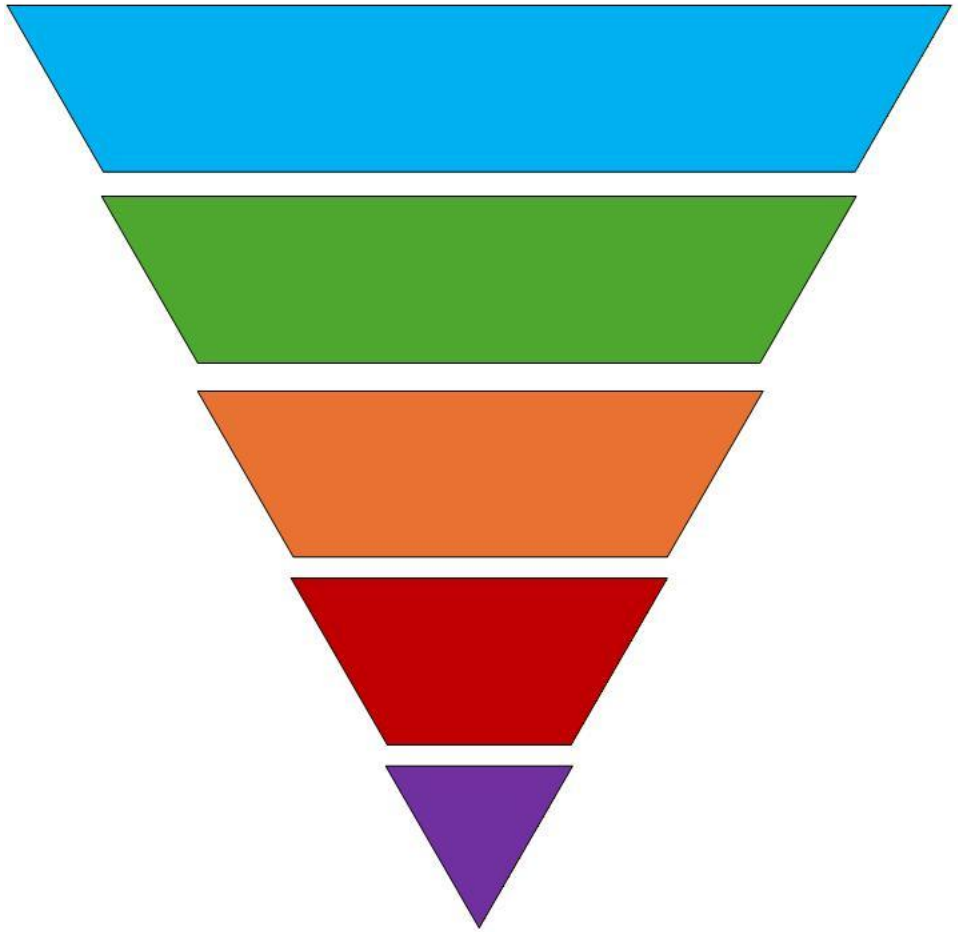
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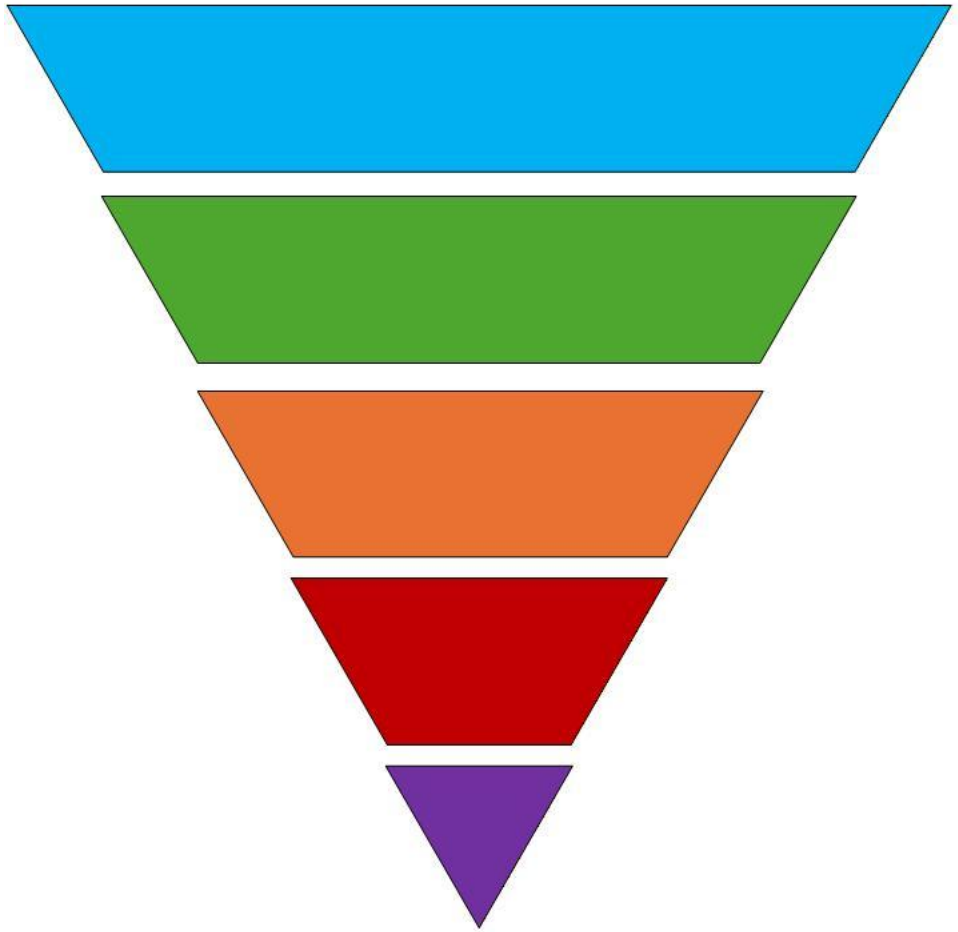
The agenda for change –policies, procedures and practices



- Embed clinical supervision and reflective practice
- Focus on safety and wellbeing for casual and after-hours staff
- Improve efficacy and timeliness of critical-incident management
- Expand training programs to improve timely access to training

Policies, procedures and practices

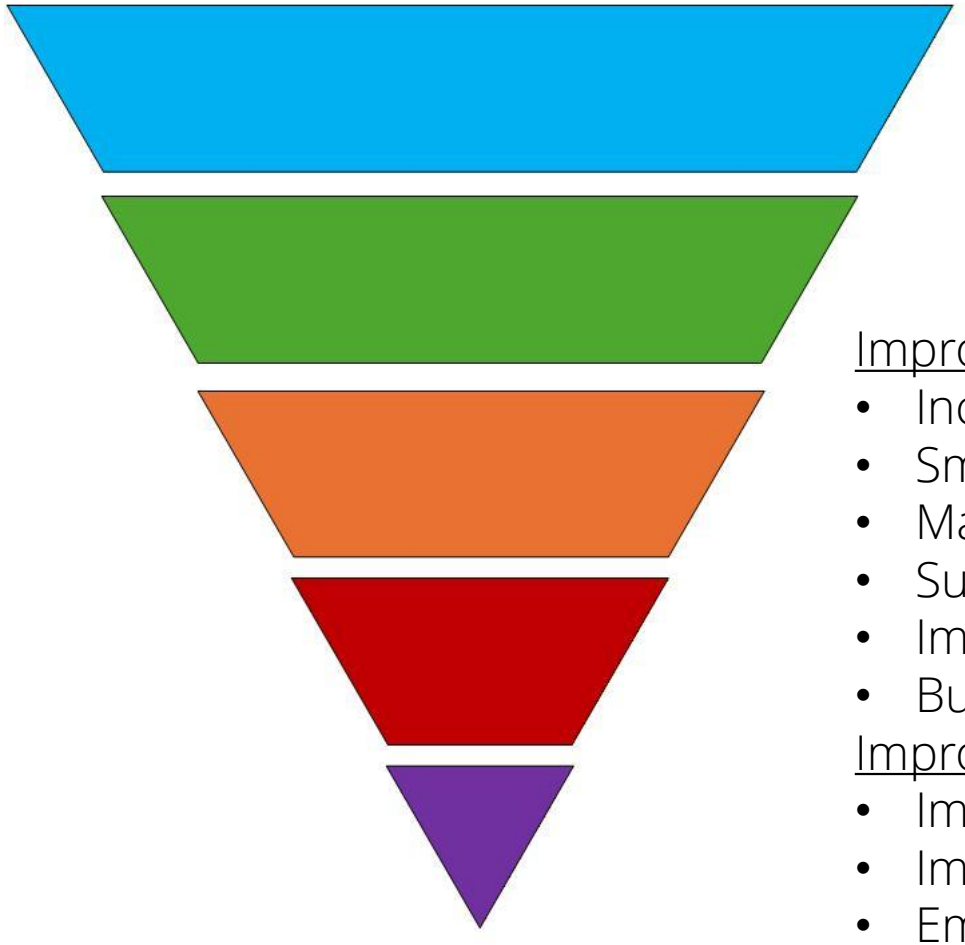
The agenda for change – physical changes



- Implement trauma-informed design principles
- Expand and improve dedicated safety equipment such as duress alarms and CCTV.

Physical changes to workplaces

The agenda for change – reducing exposure



Reducing exposure

Improved work design

- Increase staffing levels, including backfill
- Smaller case/tenant loads with guardrails to prevent overwork
- Mandate two-worker models
- Support job rotation
- Improve role clarity
- Build dedicated time for administration into daily activities

Improved pay and conditions

- Improve pay to retain skilled staff and address staff shortages
- Improve leave options
- Embed flexible working
- Increase the skills of managers

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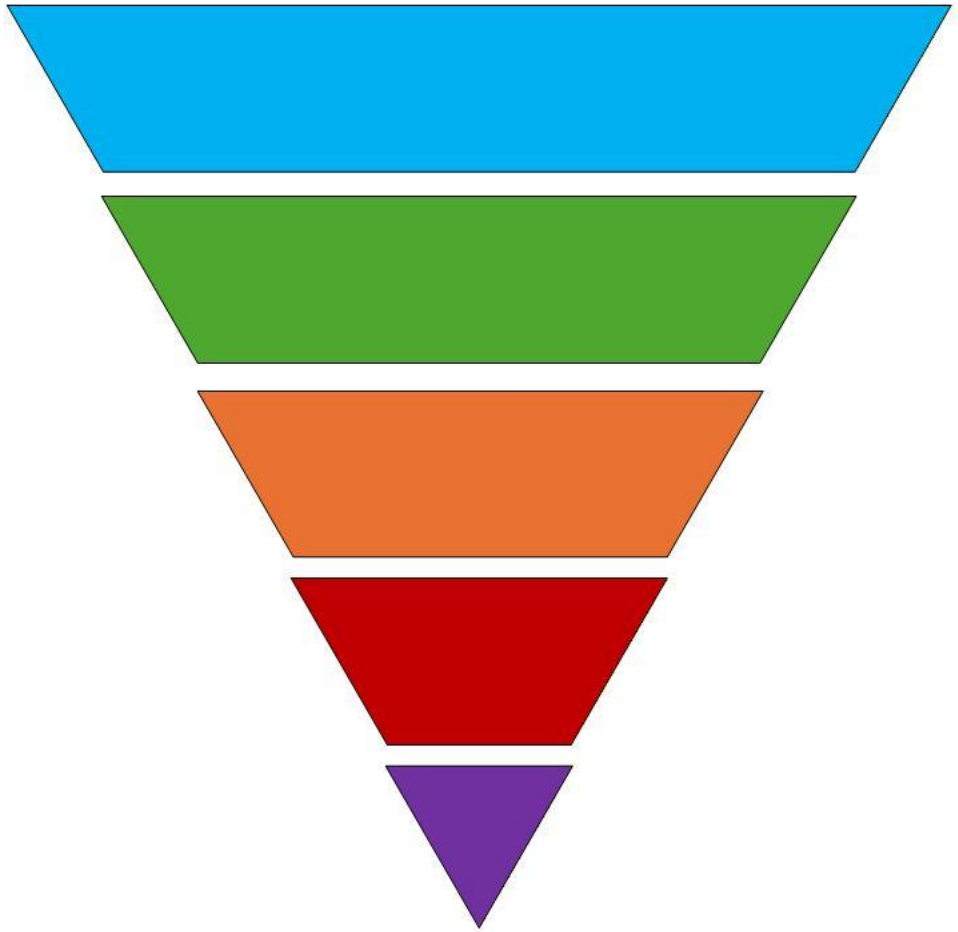
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The agenda for change – reducing the risk



Reducing the risk

Reduce overall staff and client distress by:

- Increasing the supply of both social housing and crisis accommodation
- Increase social work support for tenants in social housing.
- Support information sharing and collaboration with allied sectors.

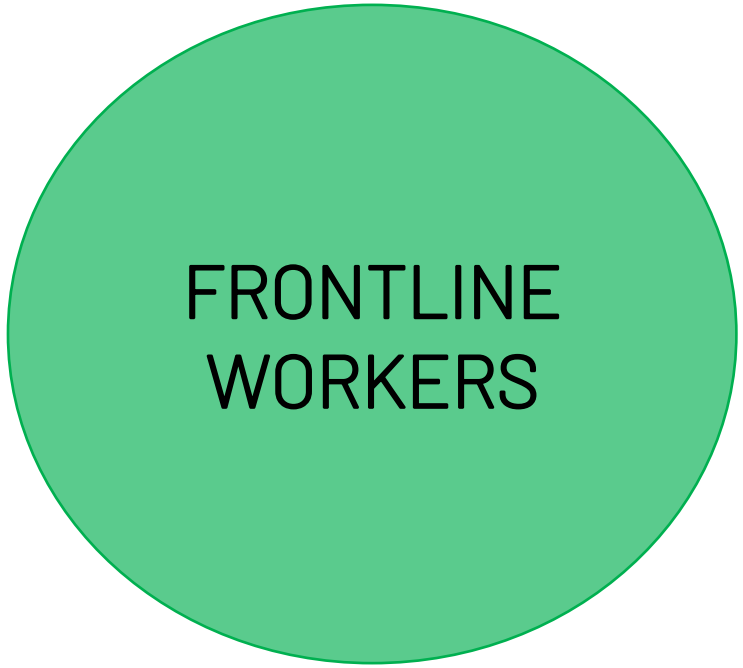
Levers for change – who can do what

Industrial – Unions et al

- Improve award conditions
- Job design
- Advocacy/campaigning

Government

- Service commissioning
- Service guidelines
- Funding
- Resourcing cross sector collaboration
- Accountability for allied sectors
- Social housing and crisis accom



SHS sector

- Advocacy/campaigning
- Sharing information
- Training

Employers

- OH&S obligations
- Job design
- Position descriptions
- Policies and procedures
- Job rotation
- Advocacy

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https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/455

https://www.cetc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/vicarious-trauma-research-brief.pdf

https://www.mindyourhead.org.au/

ASU Toolkit for Mentally Healthy Workplaces

asuvictas.com.au/VICTAS/Campaigns/