

# Substance Use Workforce is Essential

## DSU Workforce Survey results, March 2026

In late 2024, the Vermont Department of Health, Division of Substance Use Programs (DSU) distributed two surveys to gather more information about the needs of Vermont's substance use workforce including a survey for management staff to better understand workforce vacancies, and a survey for non-management staff to gather information on their experiences in the substance use workforce. Surveys were sent to staff across the care continuum, including prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction.

To ensure the substance use system of care can meet the needs of people in Vermont, it must be supported by adequate resources and capacity, and **the substance use workforce is essential**. The [2025-2028 DSU Strategic Plan](#) identifies **resources and capacity** as a DSU priority. This includes **Goal 3: Vermont's system of care has the financial, structural, and workforce capacity to anticipate and respond to the evolving impacts of substance use**.

This report outlines the key takeaways from these surveys, how they contribute to the DSU strategic plan, and how DSU can support Vermont's substance use workforce.

If you need help accessing or understanding this information, contact [ahs.vdhdsu@vermont.gov](mailto:ahs.vdhdsu@vermont.gov).

### What are the key takeaways?



#### The vacancy rate for direct service is greater than for non-direct service.

The reported vacancy rate for direct service positions (16%) was more than 2x the vacancy rate for non-direct service positions (6%).



#### Organizations anticipate a decrease in their substance use workforce.

On average, organizations anticipated a loss of 14% direct and 15% non-direct staff over a one-year period.



#### Management and non-management staff report similar reasons for vacancies and turnover.

Executive directors and managers identified **difficulty recruiting staff for substance use work, compensation packages** and **difficulty finding qualified candidates** as the top three reasons for substance use workforce vacancies.

Non-management staff recognized **physical, psychological, and emotional strain**, e.g., high workload and burnout, and **inadequate benefit structures**, including pay, as primary reasons for staff turnover in the field. Other reasons for turnover frequently reported by non-management staff included the **high administrative burden, workplace culture and low morale**, and a **lack of professional development opportunities**.

## Survey overview

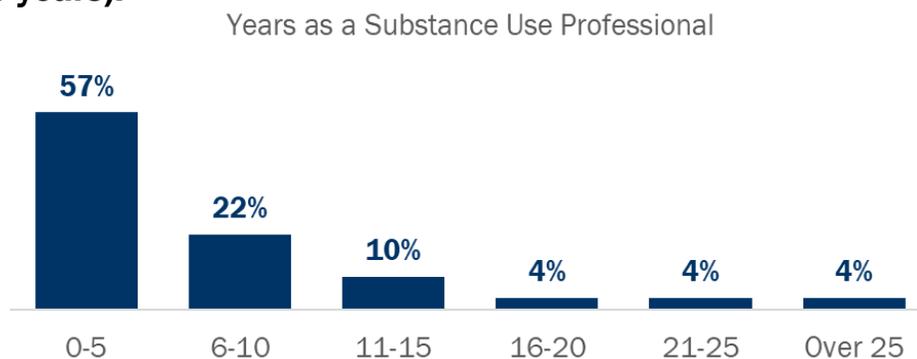
### Workforce Vacancies Survey

The Workforce Vacancies survey was sent to organizations across the care continuum, including prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction. Individuals in an executive director or manager role reported on direct and non-direct service vacancies, anticipated loss of staff, and perceived reasons for vacancies within their organization. Twenty-three (23) responses were collected from management staff, representing organizations in 13 out of 14 Vermont counties.

### Non-management Workforce Survey

The Non-management Workforce survey was sent to non-managerial staff across the care continuum. Staff were asked to provide information on what motivated them to work in the field, observed reasons for staff turnover, ways to reduce staff turnover, and challenges they encounter in their work. Eighty-two (82) responses were collected from non-management staff, with 56 individuals providing direct service, 18 non-direct service, and 8 both direct and non-direct services.

**Non-management survey respondents had an average of seven (7) years of experience in the substance use workforce, with most respondents early in their career (0-5 years).**



Due to rounding, values may not add up to 100%

## Qualitative findings

### Management and non-management share similar workforce challenges.

| Challenges identified by executive directors and managers... | Challenges identified by non-management staff...                            |
|--|---|
| Difficulty recruiting people for substance use work.         | Burnout from the physical, psychological, and emotional strain of the work. |
| Inadequate compensation packages.                            | Inadequate compensation and benefit offerings.                              |
| Difficulty retaining staff and finding qualified candidates. | Need for more professional development opportunities.                       |

### There are addressable sources of burnout in the substance use workforce.

While non-management staff shared motivations for entering the substance use workforce like their own personal experiences with substance use and wanting to “pay it forward”, helping people and the community, and promoting knowledge and awareness of substance use disorders, many staff also identified sources of burnout that may lead them to exit the workforce.

**“The job is more than 40 hours a week and is hard emotionally for me as a provider.”**

The primary sources of burnout identified by non-management staff are:

- High workload and administrative burden.
- Workplace culture and low morale, including a need for more leadership support.
- Perceived lack of change in substance use, leading to emotional fatigue and feelings of hopelessness.

## How does this work support the DSU Strategic Plan?



This work relates directly to [DSU Strategic Plan](#) Objectives 3.1: Improve workforce recruitment within the Vermont substance use workforce by 2028 and 3.2: Increase the support for organizations to retain their workforce.

Workforce surveys, like those reported in this document, will continue to be administered over the course of implementing the strategic plan, per Strategy 3.2.2.

DSU’s support of the substance use services workforce is documented in the [Workforce Development](#) Program Brief.