



Between Mission and Malaise: Organizational Culture, Workforce Wellbeing, and Service Integrity in an Urban Public Benefits Agency

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Abstract: Public benefits agencies operate at a critical intersection of social welfare policy and frontline service delivery, yet the organizational conditions shaping their workforces remain understudied. This article presents findings from a qualitative organizational assessment conducted with staff at a District of Columbia agency responsible for administering the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Data were collected through a participatory staff conference using the “Gifts and Grows” framework, which elicited employee perceptions of organizational strengths and areas for improvement. Findings reveal a mission driven workforce increasingly burdened by structural deficits in trust, accountability, communication, and leadership responsiveness. Staff exhibited trauma and stress related responses—including disengagement, emotional dysregulation, and indicators of secondary traumatic stress—that mirror the adversities experienced by the consumers they serve. Drawing on trauma informed public management, employee engagement theory, and parallel process dynamics in human services supervision, this study interprets these findings and offers recommendations for trauma informed leadership development, systemic accountability, technology alignment, and the cultivation of psychological safety. The article argues that organizational culture is dynamic rather than static and that investment in workforce wellbeing is inseparable from the agency’s public service mission.

INTRODUCTION

Public benefits agencies operate at the intersection of social policy, administrative governance, and direct human service. In Washington, D.C., the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) plays a critical role in supporting low-income families and mitigating food insecurity. These agencies are not merely administrative entities processing applications; they function as the institutional face of government’s commitment to its most vulnerable residents. Consequently, the organizational health of such agencies, including their culture, leadership capacity, workforce morale, and internal coherence—is not simply an internal management concern but a matter of public significance.

Research consistently demonstrates that the conditions under which public sector employees work directly influence the quality of services delivered to consumers. When employees experience chronic stress, leadership failures, or cultures marked by fear and distrust, the downstream effects on service recipients can be profound (CADHR, 2019; Sciepura & Linos, 2022). Human services professionals frequently operate in crisis-oriented environments and are at heightened risk for burnout, characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy (Steinheider et al., 2019).

In settings where staff routinely engage with individuals experiencing poverty, trauma, or crisis, the organizational environment becomes especially consequential.

Burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress—well-documented hazards of the helping professions—are exacerbated by dysfunctional organizational cultures that fail to support, recognize, or adequately equip their employees (Hammerton et al., 2022; Sciepura & Linos, 2022).

Washington, D.C. provides a particularly instructive context. As the nation’s capital, it administers a large and complex public benefits system serving a diverse population, many of whom have experienced systemic marginalization. The District’s SNAP-administering agency employs a human services workforce navigating simultaneous demands: complex automated case processing systems, regulatory compliance, urgent consumer needs, and an organizational environment marked by significant structural and cultural challenges.

This article synthesizes qualitative organizational assessment data gathered through a participatory staff conference using the “Gifts and Grows” framework, which invites staff to identify organizational strengths and areas for improvement. The framework, grounded in appreciative inquiry, emphasizes constructive reflection on both assets and challenges (Stephenie, 2025). Its core components—Gifts (strengths) and Grows (areas for development)—provide a structured lens for understanding organizational dynamics.

The purpose of this article is threefold: to document the organizational conditions, strengths, and challenges reported by staff across multiple levels of the agency; to interpret these findings through trauma-informed public management, employee engagement theory, and parallel process dynamics; and to offer evidence-informed recommendations for organizational improvement. The article argues that the conditions described by this workforce reflect broader patterns in public sector human services and that intentional, sustained investment in workforce wellbeing is essential to advancing equity, effectiveness, and service integrity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three interconnected theoretical frameworks guide the interpretation of this study’s organizational assessment data: trauma-informed public management, employee engagement in government, and parallel process in human services supervision. Together, these frameworks offer a multidimensional lens for understanding the agency’s strengths and challenges and for identifying actionable pathways for organizational improvement.

Trauma-Informed Public Management

The concept of trauma-informed care, originally developed in clinical and behavioral health settings, has increasingly been applied to organizational and public management contexts. Miller et al. (2022) advance the idea of *trauma-informed public management* as a framework for understanding how public sector organizations can recognize and respond to the pervasive effects of trauma—both among the populations they serve and within their own workforces. The authors argue that hidden inequalities within government agencies, including disparities in how stress and trauma are distributed across race, gender, and rank, are sustained by organizational cultures that lack awareness of trauma’s effects on behavior, cognition, and interpersonal relationships.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) identifies six principles of a trauma-informed approach: Safety; Trustworthiness and Transparency; Peer Support; Collaboration and Mutuality; Empowerment, Voice, and Choice; and Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues. These principles apply not only to service delivery but also to internal organizational functioning. A trauma-informed organization attends to the conditions that may retraumatize staff or impede their ability to function effectively. Bloom (as cited in CTIPP, n.d.) underscores this point: “Creating a culture of trauma-informed care requires us to look at our organizational culture, at the way we treat each other, and at the way we treat those we serve.”

Recent scholarship further emphasizes the role of leadership. Greer (2024) and Wyatt (2025) argue that trauma-informed leadership—characterized by relational trust-building, recognition of trauma responses, and cultivation of organizational resilience—is essential for sustainable implementation of trauma-informed practices. Mahon (2022) adds that ecological factors such as organizational climate and leadership capacity mediate the relationship between trauma-informed policy adoption and meaningful practice change. Collectively, these scholars highlight the centrality of the internal organizational environment in shaping workforce wellbeing and service quality.

Employee Engagement in Government

The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board defines employee engagement as “a heightened connection between employees and their work, their organization, or the people they work for or with.” Engagement is a strong predictor of workforce retention and organizational performance (CADHR, 2019). Research shows that highly engaged public sector employees are significantly more likely to believe their organizations are achieving their missions and that they can influence outcomes related to cost, quality, and consumer service.

Moqadi and Hamdan (2025) find that organizational culture shapes the relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance. When employees perceive misalignment between espoused values and actual organizational practices, engagement declines and performance suffers. This dynamic is particularly salient in public benefits agencies, where discrepancies between stated public service values and lived workplace conditions can generate deep dissonance.

Burnout further complicates this relationship. Awashreh and AlGhunaimi (2024) document that unaddressed burnout undermines both individual and institutional capacity for effective service delivery. Lin et al. (2024) add that trust in supervisors mediates the relationship between organizational commitment and burnout. When trust in leadership is low, public service motivation alone is insufficient to buffer against burnout. These findings underscore that mission commitment, while essential, cannot compensate for dysfunctional organizational environments.

Parallel Process in Human Services Supervision

Parallel process, originating in psychoanalytic supervision theory and widely applied in human services management, posits that relational dynamics between supervisors and supervisees tend to replicate themselves in interactions between employees and consumers

(Shulman, 2008). When supervisors are dismissive, authoritarian, or unavailable, employees may unconsciously reproduce these dynamics in their service delivery. Conversely, supervision characterized by empathy, collaboration, and attentiveness equips employees to offer the same relational quality to consumers.

In public benefits contexts, the implications of parallel process are significant. Staff who feel unheard, devalued, or unsupported by leadership are less likely to demonstrate empathy, patience, or problem-solving capacity in consumer interactions. The supervisory relationship thus functions as a foundational infrastructure for service quality. This framework provides a direct conceptual bridge between internal organizational culture and external service outcomes—a connection strongly reflected in this study’s findings.

METHODOLOGY

This study draws on qualitative organizational assessment data collected during a participatory staff conference at a District of Columbia agency responsible for administering SNAP and related public benefits programs. The assessment was structured using the “Gifts and Grows” framework, a participatory approach that invites organizational members to identify existing strengths (“Gifts”) and areas requiring development (“Grows”). Grounded in appreciative inquiry, the framework emphasizes constructive reflection on both assets and challenges as a catalyst for organizational change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

The conference was designed to include staff across multiple levels of the organizational hierarchy, including frontline eligibility workers, supervisors, mid-level managers, and program leaders. Participation was voluntary, and the facilitation approach prioritized psychological safety and candid dialogue. Small-group discussions, large-group reflections, and structured sharing protocols were used to elicit staff perspectives.

Data was documented through contemporaneous note-taking and thematic recording of group discussions. Participants identified strengths and challenges across several organizational domains, including leadership, communication, technology systems, hiring practices, compensation, professional development, and workforce wellbeing. Facilitators also documented behavioral and emotional indicators of organizational distress—such as stress responses and trauma-related patterns—that emerged organically during the conference.

A qualitative thematic analysis was applied to the collected data. Findings were first organized according to the Gifts and Grows framework and then interpreted through the theoretical lenses described earlier: trauma-informed public management, employee engagement theory, and parallel process dynamics. Although the data derives from a single agency and a single conference event, the inclusion of staff across multiple organizational levels provides breadth and a degree of triangulation. This study is presented as a descriptive organizational case study with implications for broader understanding of workforce conditions in public sector of human services.

FINDINGS: ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTHS (GIFTS)

Despite the significant challenges documented in later sections, the organizational assessment revealed a notable set of strengths that serve as genuine assets and provide a

foundation for meaningful change. These strengths are particularly significant because they persist within an environment marked by structural and cultural strain.

The most consistently expressed organizational strength was the deep mission commitment demonstrated by staff across multiple levels. Participants articulated a fervent desire to ensure that all eligible District of Columbia residents receive the benefits to which they are entitled—that families are fed, that individuals do not fall through administrative gaps, and that the agency’s public purpose is fulfilled. Research on public sector motivation identifies mission commitment as a primary driver of discretionary effort and sustained engagement (CADHR, 2019; Lin et al., 2024). The presence of this motivational foundation, even amid organizational distress, represents a critical asset upon which improvement efforts can be built.

Participants also expressed awareness of organizational problems, particularly the agency’s error rate—and a willingness to contribute to solutions. Staff reported that ideas for reducing errors and improving organizational culture already exist within the workforce. This internal generativity aligns with research showing that engaged employees are more likely to believe they can influence outcomes related to quality and service (CADHR, 2019). Although this generativity has not been fully mobilized, its presence suggests substantial untapped organizational capacity.

Supervisory strengths emerged as another important gift. Participants identified a subset of supervisors who provide meaningful coaching, support, and mentoring, and who employ creative strategies for team development, culture-building, and recognition of team successes. These supervisors were described as demonstrating genuine care for staff wellbeing—a quality shown to mitigate burnout and compassion fatigue in human services settings (Hammerton et al., 2022; Sciepora & Linos, 2022). While these strengths were not uniformly experienced, their presence demonstrates that high-quality relational leadership is achievable within the agency.

Staff tenure was also identified as a significant organizational asset. Many employees have remained with the agency for extended periods, accumulating institutional knowledge, programmatic expertise, and social capital that are invaluable in a complex, policy-intensive environment. This longevity signals a degree of organizational commitment that, if supported, could serve as a stabilizing force during periods of change.

Additional strengths included the agency’s provision of wellness activities, access to professional training and SNAP-related conferences, and the physical co-location of staff, which fosters informal community-building. Participants also noted that the agency’s willingness to convene the staff conference itself signaled openness to dialogue. A minority of staff reported feeling genuinely heard by leadership, and several participants acknowledged improvements in recent years—suggesting that positive change, when it occurs, is recognized.

Trust, Accountability, and Transparency Deficits

The most frequently and forcefully expressed challenge was a pervasive deficit of trust throughout the organization. Staff described distrust operating vertically—between frontline workers and supervisors, between supervisors and mid-level leadership, and between staff and executive leadership—as well as horizontally among colleagues. This

pattern aligns with national data showing that only 38% of federal employees trust their organization's executive leadership, and that more employees actively distrust leadership than trust it (Eagle Hill Consulting, n.d.). The severity of the trust deficit in this agency appears to reflect an intensified version of a broader public sector trend.

Failures of accountability were identified as both a cause and consequence of this distrust. Staff reported that violations of policy, professional norms, and workplace behavior standards—including chronic lateness, bullying, and even threats of violence—often go unaddressed. Participants also described instances in which positional leaders were instructed not to address performance or conduct issues with certain staff, a dynamic attributed to nepotism and cronyism. These patterns reinforce perceptions that conduct standards are inconsistently applied and that fairness is not operative. Research confirms that when organizational culture diverges from espoused values, employee engagement and performance decline (Moqadi & Hamdan, 2025).

Communication challenges further compounded the trust deficit. Staff repeatedly noted that the rationale behind organizational directives was unclear, making it difficult for supervisors and frontline workers to communicate expectations to their teams or to consumers. When the “why” behind decisions is withheld or inconsistently conveyed, employees fill the interpretive gap with speculation—often assuming bad faith. The resulting environment erodes confidence in leadership and weakens organizational coherence.

Fear and Blame Culture and Disengagement

Participants described an organizational culture characterized by fear and blame—one in which mistakes are met with punishment rather than problem-solving, concerns are dismissed rather than investigated, and staff are often told to “figure it out” when seeking guidance. This culture was reported across multiple levels of leadership, suggesting systemic rather than isolated dysfunction. Research on public management identifies fear-based environments as drivers of disengagement, turnover intent, and suppression of innovation (Awashreh & AlGhunaimi, 2024; Moqadi & Hamdan, 2025).

A particularly striking indicator of disengagement emerged in a participant's reflection: “I used to work extra hours... now I do my 8 and leave. No extras. I hate that I even feel this way.” This shift from discretionary effort to minimum compliance reflects what organizational scholars describe as the erosion of goodwill in the face of sustained organizational indifference. CADHR (2019) reports that up to 79% of employees who leave their organizations do so because they do not feel appreciated—contextualizing the disengagement described by staff as both a retention risk and a symptom of deeper cultural failure.

Even more concerning was the emergence of fatalistic beliefs among positional leaders. Several supervisors expressed the view that organizational culture cannot be changed, describing the agency's dysfunction as permanent and inevitable. Statements such as “It's always going to be this way” reflect organizational learned helplessness—a condition in which repeated experiences of inefficacy extinguish belief in the possibility of improvement. When leaders model hopelessness, they inadvertently reinforce disengagement among their teams.

Workforce Dysregulation and Trauma Responses

The assessment revealed widespread behavioral and emotional indicators consistent with trauma responses and chronic stress dysregulation among staff. Participants described patterns aligned with fight, flight, fawn, and freeze responses—physiological and psychological reactions associated with trauma exposure and sustained threat perception. Consequences included impaired decision-making, emotional volatility, difficulty concentrating, increased error rates, challenges processing information, impulsive behavior, and emotional outbursts.

These observations align with research documenting elevated risks of burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress among government and human services workers (Sciepora & Linos, 2022). Hammerton et al. (2022) identify inadequate supervision, poor organizational culture, and lack of institutional support as strong predictors of secondary traumatic stress. The stressors described by staff—including pressure to meet benchmarks, system failures, emotionally intense consumer interactions, interpersonal conflict, and lack of recovery time—mirror the conditions identified in the literature as conducive to workforce traumatization.

Nationally, 76% of full-time U.S. employees reported at least one symptom of a mental health condition in 2021, and 52% reported feeling burned out even before the COVID-19 pandemic (CTIPP, n.d.). The behavioral indicators documented in this assessment suggest that this agency's workforce may be experiencing these dynamics at even higher rates.

Systems Misalignment: Technology, Hiring, Evaluation, and Compensation

The assessment also revealed a cluster of structural challenges that exacerbate cultural and relational issues. The District of Columbia Access System (DCAS), the agency's automated case processing platform, emerged as a significant source of operational friction.

Although DCAS is designed to integrate multiple benefit programs and streamline eligibility processes, staff reported that the system is misaligned with the agency's employee evaluation tools, resulting in inaccurate performance assessments. Leaders also noted that they were initially told they did not need to learn the system, creating a persistent knowledge gap that undermines both operational effectiveness and leadership credibility.

Concerns about hiring practices were also prominent. Participants described new employees arriving insufficiently prepared for eligibility work, citing deficits in writing skills, literacy, professional conduct, and mission alignment. While such observations must be interpreted cautiously, the consistency of these reports suggests a need for more rigorous hiring, onboarding, and probationary evaluation processes. Staff also noted that terminating employees during probation is difficult, further compounding performance challenges.

Pay inequities surfaced as an additional structural concern, with implications for retention and perceptions of fairness. Participants also noted the absence of public recognition for promotions, achievements, and successes—an omission that weakens morale and diminishes the visibility of high performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this organizational assessment point to the need for a comprehensive, multi-layered strategy that addresses cultural, structural, and relational challenges simultaneously. The following recommendations integrate insights from trauma-informed public management, employee engagement theory, and parallel process dynamics to support sustainable organizational improvement.

Develop Trauma-Informed Leadership Capacity

Leadership development should prioritize trauma-informed principles, including relational trust-building, transparent communication, and recognition of trauma responses in staff. Training should equip leaders to identify signs of burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and emotional dysregulation, and to respond in ways that promote psychological safety. Embedding trauma-informed leadership competencies into supervisory expectations, performance evaluations, and professional development plans would help shift organizational culture toward greater stability and support.

Establish Clear and Consistent Accountability Structures

To rebuild trust, the agency must implement transparent and equitable accountability systems. This includes consistent enforcement of conduct standards, clear expectations for professional behavior, and timely responses to policy violations. Accountability processes should be communicated openly, applied uniformly, and insulated from favoritism or perceived cronyism. Strengthening these structures will reinforce fairness, reduce ambiguity, and restore confidence in leadership.

Improve Communication and Decision-Making Transparency

Staff repeatedly emphasized the need for clearer communication about organizational decisions, priorities, and expectations. Leaders should adopt communication practices that explain the rationale behind directives, provide opportunities for questions, and ensure that information flows consistently across all levels of the agency. Regular briefings, structured feedback loops, and accessible communication channels can help reduce speculation, increase alignment, and strengthen organizational coherence.

Align Technology, Evaluation, and Workflow Systems

The misalignment between DCAS and the agency's performance evaluation tools requires urgent attention. Leaders should ensure that evaluation metrics accurately reflect the realities of eligibility work and that supervisors possess the technical knowledge needed to support staff effectively.

Investments in system training, workflow redesign, and cross-functional collaboration between IT and program teams would help reduce operational friction and improve accuracy.

Strengthen Hiring, Onboarding, and Probationary Processes

The agency should refine its hiring practices to ensure that new employees possess the skills, professionalism, and mission alignment required for eligibility work. Enhanced onboarding processes, including structured training, mentorship, and early performance feedback—would better prepare new staff for the demands of the role. Clearer probationary evaluation criteria and more efficient mechanisms for addressing performance concerns would further support workforce quality.

Address Pay Inequities and Enhance Recognition Practices

Compensation disparities undermine morale and perceptions of fairness. Conducting a pay equity review and implementing transparent compensation policies would help address these concerns. Additionally, establishing formal recognition practices—such as public acknowledgment of promotions, achievements, and exemplary performance—would reinforce positive contributions and strengthen engagement.

Cultivate Psychological Safety and Workforce Wellbeing

Given the prevalence of trauma responses and stress dysregulation, the agency should prioritize initiatives that promote psychological safety and wellbeing. This may include structured debriefing opportunities after difficult consumer interactions, access to mental health resources, peer support programs, and workload management strategies that allow for recovery time. Creating a supportive environment will enhance staff resilience and improve service quality.

Leverage Internal Generativity for Continuous Improvement

Staff expressed a fervent desire to contribute ideas for reducing error rates and improving organizational culture. Leaders should create structured mechanisms—such as innovation teams, cross-functional workgroups, or staff advisory councils—to harness this internal expertise. Empowering employees to participate in problem-solving reinforces engagement and strengthens organizational ownership of change efforts.

CONCLUSION

This organizational assessment reveals a workforce that is deeply committed to its public service mission yet constrained by structural, cultural, and relational challenges that undermine its capacity to deliver high-quality services. The findings demonstrate that trust deficits, inconsistent accountability, fear-based cultural norms, trauma-related stress responses, and systems misalignment collectively shape the agency's internal environment and, by extension, its service outcomes. These dynamics mirror broader patterns documented in public sector of human services, underscoring the need for intentional, sustained organizational investment.

The theoretical frameworks guiding this analysis—trauma-informed public management, employee engagement theory, and parallel process dynamics—highlight the

interconnectedness of organizational culture, workforce wellbeing, and service integrity. A trauma-informed approach emphasizes the importance of safety, transparency, and relational trust; employee engagement research underscores the role of meaningful communication, fairness, and leadership credibility; and parallel process theory illustrates how internal relational patterns are reproduced in consumer interactions.

Taken together, these frameworks point to a central conclusion: organizational culture is dynamic rather than static, and meaningful change is both possible and necessary. By investing in trauma-informed leadership, strengthening accountability structures, improving communication, aligning systems, and supporting workforce wellbeing, the agency can cultivate an environment that honors its mission and enhances its service to the District's most vulnerable residents.

Ultimately, the wellbeing of the workforce is inseparable from the integrity of the agency's public service mission. Addressing the challenges identified in this assessment is not only an internal management priority but a matter of public consequence.

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