

WHO IS THE “FRONTLINE” OF THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT FIELD?

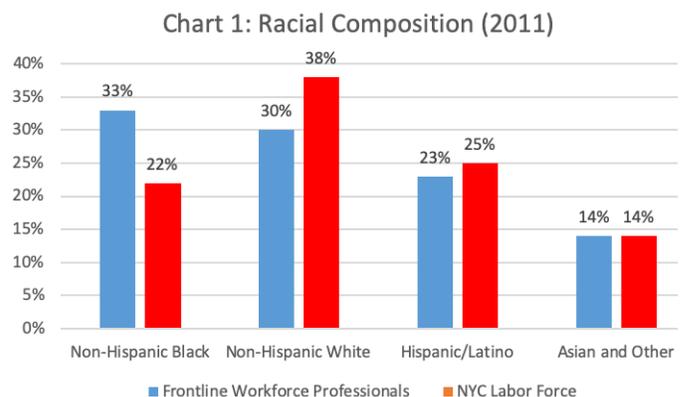
The Workforce Field Building Hub (The Hub) at Workforce Professionals Training Institute’s (WPTI) **2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Professionals** aims to gain a deeper understanding of the workers directly serving clients across New York City’s workforce development system. In particular, we will explore the ways in which their day-to-day work and longer career trajectories are influenced by the structures and challenges of the broader system. Over the next several months, The Hub will be releasing a series of short briefs on topics related to frontline worker experience, job quality, and contextual factors affecting the workforce field.

New York City’s workforce development system is diverse, containing organizations serving a wide range of target populations and providing an array of workforce and workforce-related services, including efforts to engage and support employers in connection with the hiring process. Programs such as the city’s Workforce1 system serve a broad range of jobseekers, while other organizations focus on populations with specific needs – such as individuals with prior criminal justice involvement, immigrants and refugees, or young adults. While some organizations provide intensive sector-specific technical skills training or adult basic education and/or high school equivalency preparation, others focus entirely on direct job placement. Many maintain contact with both the client and his or her employer

after the client enters a job, offering support to help the client succeed. As many unemployed and underemployed individuals have needs beyond employment, some organizations offer wraparound services, including but not limited to housing assistance, legal support, benefits assistance, and mental health services. The diversity of the system is reflected in the ways in which organizations are staffed, including job titles and functions and internal structure.

The Demographics of the Frontline - *Deep in the Trenches* (2012)

WPTI surveyed frontline workers in 2011, resulting in the *Deep in the Trenches* report (2012), and found the frontline workforce of a decade ago was disproportionately African-American, female, and young; this is a parallel to the broader human services field across the state (see chart 1).¹



Source: Deep in the Trenches survey, conducted in 2011 by Workforce Professionals Training Institute

Seventy percent of survey respondents reported annual earnings of between \$35,000 and \$59,000. At the time of the survey, more than 75 percent of frontline workers had earned at least a bachelor's degree, and 34 percent had completed some graduate coursework or an advanced degree.

Frontline workers demonstrated an interest in staying in the workforce field and advancing in their careers. More than 64 percent of survey respondents indicated a strong interest in advancing to a position with greater responsibility and pay within their organization. In spite of this, only one-third of workers reported having a clear idea of what was needed to advance within their organization.

What Do Frontline Workers Do?

Frontline workforce professionals are typically defined as anyone in the workforce development sector whose work is primarily client-facing, as opposed to supervisory or non-client matters, which mirrors accepted definitions for comparable sectors, such as healthcare.² Many different roles fit into this category, and titles vary between organizations. Furthermore, many workforce professionals wear multiple hats; thus, their jobs can involve duties that would otherwise fit into multiple distinct positions. For example, one individual can play the role of both a career advisor and a job developer, also integrating duties typically addressed by a case manager or intake specialist. Sometimes an instructor assists with referrals for wraparound services, even though those are responsibilities often associated with a navigator. The *Deep in the Trenches* study found that nearly three-quarters of frontline workers indicated having four or more distinct job responsibilities.

When divided by their specific duties, the primary positions that constitute the frontline include³:

Role	Responsibilities
Job Developer/Account Manager	Employer engagement and worksite relationships; job placement; serve as the link between the rest of the workforce team and the employer
Case Manager	General case management and career coaching; work with participants to establish goals, document progress, and provide life skills support; support clients during transitions and the follow-up period after exit from programs
Career Advisor	Provide career coaching and guidance; assist with mock interviews and resume preparation; offer soft-skills training and support
Instructor/Trainer/Education Specialist	Credential and work-readiness instruction, and/or academic instruction, including adult basic education and high school equivalency prep; development of curriculum and assessments
Navigator	Assist participants in accessing various programs to obtain needed wraparound services, benefits, and supports (childcare, housing, etc.)
Job Coach	Provide support for workers at work sites, often for work-ers with disabilities, helping them learn and perform their job duties, as well as assisting with other workplace skills
Retention Specialist	Provide ongoing follow-up and support for jobseekers once they have been placed in employment
Intake/Administrative/Data Specialist	Assist with intake and completion of forms as well as data entry and maintenance

Why the Frontline Matters

The frontline workers discussed above play a critical role in the workforce system, as they are the individuals chiefly responsible for working directly with jobseekers, who are often facing more needs than simply accessing employment. Success in their job is critical to the performance of their organizations, the success of New York City's workforce development system, and ultimately to the success of their clients.

Throughout our series of briefs, we will explore issues related to the frontline workforce, and to our ongoing study of how we can build a workforce system that better supports its workers, ultimately leading to a stronger, more effective workforce system. Our next brief, will delve deeper into why we are examining the frontline workforce and their experiences.

The 2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce

Professionals explores the motivations of workforce professionals, their working environments and long-term career goals, and challenges they face. Findings from the survey and resulting recommendations will inform field-wide leadership of better strategies for worker engagement and satisfaction, and improved program performance.

The Workforce Field Building Hub brings together key leaders from across the interdisciplinary and diverse New York City and national workforce community to identify common issues and solutions to build and strengthen the field of workforce development. For more information, visit <http://thehub.workforceprofessionals.org>.

Workforce Professionals Training Institute (WPTI) increases the effectiveness of people, programs, and organizations that are committed to generating pathways out of poverty through employment. Our three-tiered approach – professional training, organizational consulting, and systems building – strengthens capacity at all levels of the workforce development system. For more information, visit <http://workforceprofessionals.org>.

The *2020 Survey of NYC Frontline Workforce Professionals* and brief series are made possible through support from the Altman Foundation; Ira W. De Camp Foundation; The New York Community Trust; and the New York City Workforce Funders.

Footnotes

1. A 2017 study by the Restore Opportunity Now campaign found that the human services workforce across New York State was 76% female, and 27% Non-Hispanic Black. Meanwhile, Non-Hispanic Black workers represented only 13% of the state's broader labor force. James Parrott, Fiscal Policy Institute. Undervalued and Underpaid: How New York State Shortchanges Nonprofit Human Services Providers and Their Workers (p. 14).

2. This is analogous to definitions of the frontline workforce in other sectors. For example, The National Fund for Workforce Solutions defines the frontline workforce in the healthcare field as providing "routine and essential services in all settings. They...are responsible for a range of operations including providing administrative, direct care, environmental, and technical services to patients, families, and caregivers." In an article for the Harvard Business Review (2012), Anthony Tjan defined frontline workers as "the employees who are closest to serving and supporting the customer who get an unfiltered view of how customers interact with a product or service."

3. Information taken from City of New York workforce Requests for Proposals, including those for Advance & Earn (NYC Department of Youth and Community Development, 2019), First Course NYC (NYC Department of Small Business Services, 2019), and Out-of-School Youth Services (NYC Department of Youth and Community Development, 2015).