Viewpoints

Time to Pay for Hazardous Youth Work

By Andrew Hahn

William Harvey Jr., a youth outreach worker for the city of Boston, was recently honored by the city and his union. The ceremony — with fellow youth workers, union members, a city councilman and a written proclamation — was way overdue for a man who took a bullet to the head.

Harvey was shot in the temple last summer, having been mistaken for a gang member in yet another incident of the city’s all-too-common street violence. According to Boston news reports, he was off-duty at the time, although other reports by David Boeri, a talented and passionate Boston reporter, describe how the city treated the shooting as in the line of duty. In any case, the bullet — which fragmented when it entered his skull — is still in Harvey’s head.

After the shooting, Harvey went on Workers Compensation, which reporter Boeri explained is actually a pay cut; Harvey could not return to work, nor keep up with his student college loans, according to Boeri.

Initially, Harvey heard nothing from Boston’s mayor or from activist ministers known to work closely with street workers and gangs. Anyone looking for a rapid response team to address the trauma of the shooting would be waiting for a long time.

Unlike for other professionals who work in dangerous settings, there was no well-defined safety net in place for Harvey after he was shot. Boston police and firefighters go on 100 percent pay and are required to have therapy and other forms of assistance, according to Boeri, but that wasn’t the case for Harvey. He finally got a therapy appointment, four months after the shooting, according to Boeri, but he couldn’t make it because he was hospitalized for an anxiety attack a night earlier.

Boeri, through persistent reporting on local radio and in newspapers, emphasized some people in the community to take action. The victim’s union, SEIU Local 888, was able to get the city to make a $4,000 grant to cover housing expenses to help Harvey with rent and other expenses. A grateful public expressed thanks and appreciation for him in the recent ceremony at City Hall.

Harvey’s story brings up an understudied and underappreciated topic: wages and benefits for youth workers who can get injured in the line of duty. Many youth workers put themselves in harm’s way every day. Stabbings, shootings, assaults and homicides occur frequently in street work, but we know nothing about what happens to the injured street workers who give so much to make urban life safer for families.

Maybe we need to rethink how wages and hazard pay could help youth workers who are harmed in the line of duty.

An enduring theme in youth work is the effect of low pay and how it contributes to a cycle of malaise, turnover and exits from the youth-serving field. In 2006, the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition noted that pay was the primary factor in deciding to stay or leave the youth-serving field (see nytc.org/library).

Fixing low pay is a perpetual challenge for the field. It would be interesting to know how fears about personal security combined with low pay factor into decisions that youth workers make about leaving the profession. I have seen no research on this topic.

Next, consider a supplementary-hazard-duty-pay system to reward and assist youth workers on the dangerous frontlines. In 1997, the Texas Youth Commission announced new rules for hazardous-duty pay for employees having “daily/ routine direct care” with youth under the commission’s jurisdiction. Specifically excluded were desk employees working in safe environments. Hazardous-duty pay for others was initially authorized at the rate of $10 per month for each year of employment in a potentially dangerous position.

The military already has hazardous-duty pay scales. For example, soldiers who purchase, demolish explosives and handle toxic fluids earn roughly $159 per month in extra pay.

In most communities, police, firefighters and forest service personnel draw hazardous-duty pay as well. Such pay also exists for parole or probation workers, and for certain unionized groups, including some municipal-funded street workers. School reformers are talking about new pay scales for teachers who work in schools in high-crime areas.

To the extent that hazardous-duty pay is implemented more broadly, a special challenge in our field will be covering workers at community-based organizations. These frontline institutions are notoriously poor and have low pay scales. They are certainly less likely to offer hazard pay, even though there is a great need.

One start would be more journalists who understand youth work. We need more reporters like David Boeri to report on and track injured street workers. (You can hear his coverage on whedon.org.)

Even among those who support hazard pay, we need to guard against glossing over its complications. People will debate how to define hazardous conditions. Also, it will be hard to define what it means to be on duty, compared with private time. This is especially complex for street workers, who may spend 98 percent of their hours and are often on call during their off-hours.

Let’s move to hazard pay, fair compensation and employee assistance for the wounded. It will help us keep valuable youth workers. And it’s a matter of simple decency.

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