

“The Toughest Beat”

Investing in Employee Well-Being at the Denver Sheriff Department

Teaching Case

GAYLEN WILLIAMS MOORE, ELIZABETH LINOS, AND JORRIT DE JONG

Sonya Gillespie, chief of administration for the Denver Sheriff Department (DSD, “the department”), always thought of its roughly 1,100 sworn deputies and civilian staff as “family.” Having followed her grandfather and mother into a career at DSD spanning more than three decades, Gillespie’s concern for the safety and well-being of the workforce was rooted not only in family history but also in the real, day-to-day challenges of the job. “We are interacting with people at some of the lowest points in their lives, when they’re incarcerated,” she reflected. “And we are also in the same environment. That can be very difficult.”¹

Working at DSD

The average corrections officer in the US witnessed dozens of incidents of violence, injury, and/or death on the job.² Rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among corrections officers were comparable to those for survivors of war and disasters.³ Incarcerated individuals also suffered from PTSD at exceptionally high rates, and many struggled with substance or alcohol use disorders, major mental health challenges, chronic health problems, physical and intellectual disabilities, or some combination of the above.⁴

DSD ran two facilities: the downtown Van Cise-Simonet Detention Center and the Denver County Jail.ⁱ Ensuring the care and safety of the roughly 1,700 individuals held in these facilities on any given day was the department’s most essential—and challenging—responsibility.⁵ For everyone employed and incarcerated in the jails, the volatile environment, grinding hours, and small and large indignities of detention took a toll. Staffing shortages left deputies routinely working mandatory overtime, with shifts sometimes stretching to sixteen hours.⁶ Gillespie knew that deputies were exhausted, frustrated, and emotionally drained. About half of them quit in the first five years on the job, with more than half of those departures occurring within the first year.⁷

DSD offered a variety of employee assistance programs, including mental health services, confidential counseling, a chaplain unit, wellness programming, and a peer support program. Deputies were not always aware of these resources, however, and those who knew about them were often reluctant to utilize them, unsure how to access them, or simply did not have time to take advantage. It was not

ⁱ In general, city and county jails house people who have been arrested and are awaiting trial or are serving short sentences. Those with longer sentences typically serve time in prisons run by state or federal corrections departments.



obvious to Gillespie how to mitigate the stress most effectively: “It resonates with me when employees think that leadership doesn’t care about them. That’s hard to hear because I know how hard the wellness team works, and I know how much they care, and I know how much it impacts them when someone is going through something, and they don’t necessarily have a solution.”

Inequities in Custody

Elias Diggins, who started his career at the department in the mid-1990s as a 21-year-old deputy, was appointed sheriff in the summer of 2020.ⁱⁱ He tapped Gillespie, then major of employee relations, to serve as chief of administration: “One of the reasons I promoted Chief Gillespie was because I know that her heart is always in the right place. She leads with her heart. That is her gift, to connect with people in a tremendous way.”⁸ Diggins and Gillespie took on these leadership positions at a time of great uncertainty and intense racial reckoning for law enforcement. As long-serving Black officers, they stepped into the intersection of all the emotion and complexities of the moment.

While DSD deputies and those incarcerated tended to come from a similar socio-economic background, roughly 25 percent of the incarcerated population was Black, compared to just 10 percent of the county’s population and 17 percent of staff.^{9,iii} This disproportionate representation meant that any harm that fell on incarcerated people landed hardest on the Black community. In Denver as elsewhere, news reports on deaths and excessive force used against people of color in custody had brought ever-growing public scrutiny to racial bias in its culture and practices.

Systemic inequities also made life in custody difficult for women—an area of focus for Diggins, who had launched a gender equity commission for the department while serving as interim sheriff in 2015. He knew that women who were incarcerated were more likely than men to have a history of trauma, more likely to be struggling with mental health and substance abuse challenges, and more likely to experience the exercise of authority as frightening.¹⁰ Moreover, he observed, gender inequities were inherent in “the way that jails and prisons have been built through a male lens.”¹¹ For example, prior to 2017, there was nowhere for nursing mothers in DSD custody to pump breastmilk and no way to save or deliver milk to their infants; medical personnel simply advised expressing breastmilk by hand and disposing of it.¹² In a more widely known case, the department had not been able to identify what policy was violated when Diana Sanchez, held at the county jail on a probation violation, was forced to deliver her baby unattended in her cell in 2018.¹³

The preceding ten years had ushered in hundreds of reforms at DSD, and there were many notable improvements and bright spots. The department’s housing assignment policy for transgender people in custody had been replicated across the US.¹⁴ The county jail was preparing to open a long-awaited “gender-responsive” women’s unit.¹⁵ But it was clear to Gillespie and Diggins that there was still much to be done for those in custody—and for the deputies and staff shouldering the department’s work.

ⁱⁱ Diggins had previously served as interim sheriff from July 2014 to October 2015. In the intervening years before being appointed sheriff, he was the division chief operationalizing reform efforts under Sheriff Patrick Firman and chief of operations under Interim Sheriff Frances Gomez.

ⁱⁱⁱ County population figure excludes people identifying themselves as biracial or multi-racial in the 2020 US census. DSD statistics do not include this category.

The 2010s: Deaths and Reforms at DSD

Almost a decade earlier—on July 18, 2011—Michael Hancock was sworn in as Denver’s mayor.^{iv} Several high-profile cases of excessive force—including the 2010 killing of Marvin Booker, a 56-year-old Black street preacher who died at the Downtown Detention Center after deputies restrained and tased him—had precipitated a crisis in the city’s public safety department, which cycled through six leaders in 18 months.¹⁶

In mid-2014, with the city paying out millions in penalties and settlements for misconduct in its jails, Mayor Hancock ordered a top-to-bottom review. Hilliard Heintze, a consulting firm hired to assist, issued a report calling for “immediate, extensive and sustained reforms to almost every area of the Denver Sheriff Department’s operations.”¹⁷ Sheriff Gary Wilson resigned, and Diggins stepped in as interim sheriff while the city undertook a nationwide search.

Patrick Firman, a former deputy sheriff from Illinois, was appointed sheriff in October 2015. Within his first month on the job, an encounter between deputies and a man being held at the downtown detention center resulted in death. Michael Marshall, a five-foot-four, 112-pound Black man housed in a secure unit for people with mental illness and other behavioral challenges, was awaiting trial on charges of trespassing and disturbing the peace. His death, attributed to “complications of positional asphyxia to include aspiration pneumonia due to physical restraint by law enforcement due to agitation during acute psychotic episode,” was ruled a homicide.¹⁸ Three sergeants and a captain had witnessed deputies and medical personnel working alternately to restrain and revive Marshall over seventeen minutes but did not intervene.¹⁹

Video footage of the altercation that ended Marshall’s life was widely viewed. To many, his death seemed to encapsulate a kind of perfect storm of systemic failures. Marshall was unhoused. He had been unable to raise the \$100 bond for his release. The jail could not ensure he was properly medicated. He was stuck there until the city could free up a case-burdened public defender to represent him. He should never have been in the jail in the first place, critics contended.²⁰ In their view, Michael Marshall had paid with his life for the failures of a system that was always rigged against Black people.

The same month that Michael Marshall was killed, two women working as deputies filed a lawsuit against DSD citing overcrowding, inadequate staffing, incessant harassment and obscene threats from people in custody, and leadership’s failure to address their concerns.²¹ Less than a year later, a dozen more deputies sued DSD for failing “to take reasonable steps to prevent and stop” sexual harassment and “discriminating against plaintiffs and other female deputies with respect to job assignments and other terms and conditions of employment.”²²

The mayor’s office had given Firman a mandate and funding to implement Hilliard Heintze’s recommendations. The department’s 2016 budget alone allocated over \$24 million for reforms including nearly \$7 million for recruitment, \$4.1 million for a new women’s housing unit, \$5.4 million for new staff positions, and \$2.5 million for training.²³ The department brought on 200 new deputies,

^{iv} Denver has a merged city/county government. The sheriff of Denver is a political appointee of the mayor, not an elected official.

but staffing challenges persisted amid a rising jail population. Facilities averaged 95 percent capacity.²⁴ Reported assaults by incarcerated individuals on deputies and fellow inmates spiked.²⁵ With workers departing and recruitment slowing, it seemed the staffing crisis might run deeper than anything budget allocations or “best practices” could address. Something more essential needed to change.

Evidence

In late 2016, Mayor Hancock reached out to Andrea Albo, deputy director of assistance in the city’s human services department, asking if she would like to serve as DSD’s first chief of staff. Albo, whose background was in social work, initially doubted she was suited for the role. Through conversations with the mayor and department leadership, however, she concluded that the department needed “an experienced leader with a proven record to drive the work forward and be strategic about creating structures that would be sustainable” rather than another law enforcement expert.²⁶ Reforming processes and systems was her bread and butter. She agreed to take the job.

One of Albo’s priorities was ensuring that the department take steps to address racial inequity. At human services, she had worked closely with Kim Desmond, director of the Denver Office for Women and Families and a leader on DSD’s gender equity commission. She recruited Desmond to help lead the charge. Together, they began having conversations with stakeholders inside and outside the department, working to build trust and shared understanding. In May 2017, at a citywide gender equity summit, Desmond called on the mayor’s office to launch a racial and social justice initiative, arguing that siloing work on gender versus race was counterproductive: without racial equity, there could be no gender equity. Desmond believed she and Albo could make DSD the test case for creating a replicable “racial equity toolkit” that could aid equity work across city government. “This was an opportunity to build and test the concept in a live, complex environment that was rich with opportunity and risk,” said Albo. “It was a gigantic leap of faith and a necessary step, due to the severe inequities that had existed for decades.”²⁷

Despite significant pushback, Albo eventually persuaded DSD’s executive management team to establish racial equity as a strategic priority. “Before the work began, there was no baseline for anything, including language,” said Albo. “A paradigm shift was challenging a system. It was a sink-or-swim situation that required great courage and persistence.” She and Desmond began to explore tactics and data, searching for “ways to introduce evaluative-driven practices to move racial and gender equity forward in the Sheriff Department.”²⁸ A friend at the city’s budget and management office suggested Desmond contact The People Lab (TPL), a research initiative out of the University of California, Berkeley that studied how to recruit, retain, and support government workers.[∨] Policy and strategic plans were one thing, but ultimately, this was about people interacting in a place where those who fell through the holes in the social fabric landed. “If we put individuals within a system that is designed to fail,” said Desmond, “then we can’t be surprised when they don’t succeed.” Desmond and Albo wanted the city to address the interconnected challenges facing deputies and incarcerated people with evidence-based interventions that advanced racial and gender equity. Was there a plausible, testable intervention that could help?

[∨] The People Lab moved from the University of California, Berkeley to the Harvard Kennedy School in 2022.

Burnout

To begin answering this question, TPL’s team conducted off-site interviews with the department’s sworn and civilian staff during the summer of 2018. Jessica Harney, a researcher with TPL who led the interviews, explained: “What we heard wasn’t surprising: burnout was high.^{vi} This has been something that many frontline workers and other public servants have been facing all throughout the country and, in some sectors, internationally as well. While the work can be stressful, and burnout can be associated with some of the stresses of the day-to-day parts of the job, a lot of what we heard—which also aligns with what we know from research on burnout in corrections—is that conflict or tension with management or administration is a primary contributor to stress, rather than the interactions that they’re experiencing with incarcerated individuals. People often share that they don’t feel valued by their leaders.”²⁹ Many DSD workers indicated that talking to peers and sharing experiences offered some relief. “This isn’t a Denver-specific issue,” said Harney. “It’s a very systemic issue. It’s something that’s caused by workplace conditions.”

At the end of August 2018, Sheriff Firman announced that the department had completed nearly all 277 of the reforms recommended by Hilliard Heintze, along with another 120 or so made by task forces, the city auditor, and the Office of the Independent Monitor.³⁰ But many working inside the organization were still waiting for reforms that would lighten their heavy load. The days were still too long, and the stakes too high. The union president derided the sheriff’s announcement in the *Denver Post*: “We’re worried about someone getting killed in the facilities and they’re walking around saying, ‘Hooray, we did this!’”³¹ Deputies were dealing with a level of fatigue they believed no one but their fellow officers could truly understand.

Desmond recalled, “They will tell you some things in ways that are very frank: ‘You’re trying to tell us our job and you don’t even work here.’ I’m like, ‘You’re right. I don’t know what it feels like to be navigating your worst day, and you have to do overtime, and someone spits in your face. And then you’re on the nine o’clock news.’ But I do understand what it’s like to be a Black woman in America who encounters racism on a daily basis.” Meeting the deputies with empathy and opening space for dialogue around bias and systemic racism was outside the department’s norms. Desmond knew these conversations would not in and of themselves fix DSD’s problems, but they were a start. When fear, anger, or doubt arose, she could always anchor the conversation in the commitment to equity in the department’s strategic plan.

In the meantime, TPL had begun working with Gillespie and Desmond—along with key members of DSD’s strategy and performance management and communications teams—to collect and analyze survey data on the prevalence of burnout within the department. They presented their initial findings at the end of 2019, as Sheriff Firman was preparing to transition out of his role and the city began searching for a replacement.

^{vi} The International Classification of Diseases manual (ICD-11) defines burnout as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed” which manifests as feelings of exhaustion; cynical, negative, or detached attitudes about one’s job; and reduced efficacy. See <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>.

For Gillespie, the details in TPL’s report were not surprising but nonetheless disheartening. Ninety percent of survey respondents reported clinically significant levels of burnout. More than half of these reported their degree of burnout as high or severe.^{vii} (See Appendix 1 for details on TPL’s findings.) Gillespie was eager to learn what might work: “When we talk about culture, I sometimes get tunnel vision, because this is our culture, and this is what we know,” she explained. “What I was hoping for was to get other ways of looking at things.”

Gillespie and other DSD senior managers believed that improving the department’s culture would benefit employees as well as people in custody. “When you prioritize the needs of deputies and treat them in an inclusive manner, that will inform how they respond to the needs of the folks in the jail system,” said Desmond. Other research in the public sector had suggested a correlation between employee satisfaction and the quality of service for clients.³² Common sense alone seemed to dictate that happier people would treat those around them better: “People are tired, and that leads to shorter fuses,” said Courtney Williams, who supervised DSD’s risk management and innovation unit.³³

Moreover, if deputies were happier in their jobs, they might stay at DSD. Making the right investments in staff retention was a straightforward matter of dollars and cents. “We know that for every dollar that you spend to retain someone, you have to spend ten or a hundred dollars to recruit a new person,” said Zach McDade, a data analyst for the Denver Department of Public Safety who worked on the project.³⁴ And if the benefits extended to people in custody, the city might also avoid costly legal fees and settlements.

Designing the Intervention

TPL had already conducted a randomized controlled trial (RCT)^{viii} with frontline workers in a different context known to produce high rates of burnout: 911 dispatch centers. That study had found that creating opportunities for dispatchers to share advice and experiences with each other had created a stronger sense of perceived social support among their peers, leading to reduced burnout and resignations.³⁵

They wondered whether a similar approach could have similar effects amongst DSD deputies. “Of course—like any randomized controlled trial—replication is absolutely key,” said Harney. “This program should be tested in different contexts—different sectors, different agencies, and even different contexts within corrections.”³⁶ She also stressed the importance of agencies’ involvement in adapting the intervention: “Having a dedicated collaborator makes all the difference too—the importance of Denver’s dedication cannot be overstated!”

In early 2020, the team at TPL began working with DSD to co-design and plan a tailored, equity-focused intervention to build on the positive evidence for the peer support approach they had piloted in their previous RCT. Gillespie saw the value of this approach: “Peer support is really just a network of people

^{vii} Data from The People Lab.

^{viii} RCTs are often considered the “gold standard” for social science research because, with a large enough sample, randomization allows you to create two statistically identical groups. If one of those groups receives a different intervention, any differences in outcomes can be credibly and causally attributed to the intervention itself and not to other factors.

who come together because we share that common knowledge of our work environment.” A peer-based program held promise because, as Desmond knew from her experience working with employees across city government, “No one wants an outsider to come in to tell them how to do their job.”

In the past, Gillespie felt, the department had often utilized peer support in a more reactive way, “when someone’s going through something challenging.” TPL’s program would offer—and test—a more proactive approach. In conversations with TPL, DSD staff had not only stressed the value of sharing their experiences with their coworkers, but also cited perceptions of stigma associated with seeking out mental health support.^{ix} To Harney, “starting with something that isn’t explicitly framed as mental health but as peer support” made the most sense. The team was preparing to pilot a program they believed might encourage a sense of belonging and shared support among DSD staff.

It was important to DSD and the mayor’s office—which hoped the intervention might serve as a model for other city departments—that this approach be rigorously evaluated; as Desmond noted, “We scale broken things without utilizing evidence-based research in local government, which interferes with our ability to produce equitable outcomes.” To validate the results, the new RCT would randomly sort every DSD employee into one of two groups. One group would receive a peer-based wellness program and the other (“control” group) would receive an individual-based wellness program modeled on common organizational wellness initiatives. The researchers and DSD would use surveys and other relevant data from before and after the intervention to measure whether the peer-oriented program improved employee well-being above and beyond the more traditional approach.

Pause—and Restart

And then, in Denver as everywhere, COVID-19 threw everything into confusion. As illness began to spread, Interim Sheriff Frances Gomez scrambled to coordinate early releases for people in custody—especially those at high risk for severe illness and death.³⁷ Between early releases and police issuing summonses instead of making arrests for non-violent property and drug crimes, the average daily population of the jails had dropped 41 percent by mid-April.³⁸ Any relief this might have offered deputies, however, was subsumed by anxiety over infection. Fearing for their lives, some of the department’s longest serving deputies took early retirements. Those who stayed faced new job stressors and constraints.

Diggins was sworn in as sheriff July 20, 2020. Having worked with Diggins on the gender equity commission, Desmond felt she understood what motivated him. She made the case that he should recommit the department to the project aimed at improving employee well-being: “I appealed to his morality and why he became sheriff.” The sheriff listened to her pitch and seemed to respond positively to the team’s hypothesis: “Considering the outsized impact that correctional officers can have on the experience of the incarcerated population, understanding and improving officer well-being is a critical component in broader efforts in public safety.”³⁹ It was only one of many possible “theories

^{ix} Deputies were sometimes reluctant to speak openly about their experience at work with mental health professionals due to concerns about legal exposure. In addition, the company DSD used for mental health service provision was responsible for clearing deputies for work, raising concerns about job security. (See Hilliard-Heintze report in endnotes.)

of change,” but Diggins felt it was one worth testing: “The study felt like another piece of this very tough puzzle, to figure out how to rebuild as an agency.”

As department leaders, Diggins and Gillespie could not deny or ignore what the researchers’ data from interviews with employees had shown them so far. “To have other folks come in and question what we’re doing was tough at first,” said Diggins. “We thought we were on track. We didn’t realize how much work we needed to do to really go forward.” As chief of administration, responsible for recruitment, training, retention, safety, and general well-being of employees, Gillespie admitted feeling inwardly defensive at times: “There’s always the desire to get out there and say, ‘No, but wait, we have this!’ or, ‘Did you know about that?’ Maybe they’re not recognizing some resource that they have or something that might help.” On the other hand, she acknowledged, facing the reality of a staffing shortage that seemed to have no end in sight, “people are justified in what they’re feeling.” She wanted to see the project through.

The RCT

All 1,062 deputies and civilian staff at the department were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Those assigned to the individually-focused program received eight weekly emails with wellness prompts inviting them to write responses in an anonymous online journaling platform. Each prompt focused on well-being from an individual perspective—for example, “A healthy body needs the companionship of a healthy mind... Take some time to write down what was difficult to deal with this week and how you will help yourself decompress.” Individuals could not access anyone’s journal but their own.

Those assigned to the peer-focused program received eight weekly emails that aimed to strengthen connectedness and peer support by inviting recipients to share their experiences and advice on an anonymous, confidential online platform. Prompts focused on shared identity, for example: “As deputies, we work the toughest beat there is. Think of a time when a fellow deputy helped you navigate an emotionally challenging situation at work. How would you offer support to someone in a similar situation?”^x Responses were accessible only to other members of the group. By framing their responses as opportunities to reflect on how coworkers had helped or could help one another, the research team hoped to build a sense of belonging. Highlighting the support they offered their coworkers added a dimension of meaning to their work beyond its impact on public safety.⁴⁰ To ensure they could see each other’s contributions even if they did not click the link to the online platform, the emails for the peer-focused group also included select responses to the previous week’s prompt. (See Appendix 2 for the first four weeks of emails for both groups.)

To determine the impact of this intervention, the team planned follow-up surveys and data analysis for both groups immediately following the 8-week study period and again six months later. They would track changes in attitudes towards the incarcerated population, perceptions of self-efficacy and feeling understood, retention and leave, involvement in incidents on the job, and degree of burnout for individuals. (See Appendix 3 for a complete list of survey indicators used to measure outcomes.)

^x Email text varied slightly based on whether the recipient was a sworn or civilian employee. See Appendix 2.

Growing Unease

Deputies and staff had been assured repeatedly that they could share their viewpoints safely and anonymously, but expressing themselves freely without fear of repercussions was unfamiliar. For some, there was lingering anxiety about voicing criticisms or personal stories. “There were a few officers that would call me and be like, ‘Should we be doing this?’” said DSD Communications Director Daria Serna.⁴¹ They wondered, “What is this doing? How is this going to help us?”

Some respondents in the peer-focused group, as envisioned, shared messages of appreciation (“I rely on my fellow deputies. They are truly a lifesaver. When I was going through something tough, my friends were there for me”).^{xi} Others used the opportunity to vent, striking a more bitter note (“In the eyes of leadership, you’re just another body”).

As the study approached its midpoint, there was a growing unease among department leadership. “There was some concern that this would make people feel worse,” said Director of Performance Management and Strategy Lizzie Friend, “not just dealing with your own stuff but also hearing about everyone else’s stuff.”⁴² This could worsen rather than improve well-being. Moreover, for a hierarchical, command-and-control organization like DSD, the inability to control or respond to what was being said and shared in real time was unsettling. As McDade recalled, “We had a few people who started using that message board application to share some concerning messages. Things like grievances or just serious stuff that ought to go through formal chains. And I think we didn’t anticipate our RCT forum being used to share that kind of information.”

“We’re socialized as leaders to say, ‘Someone shared something bad about their experience, and I’m responsible for fixing it,’” said Desmond. Being powerless to intervene with a policy change or a disciplinary action or even a direct conversation was uncomfortable. Sharply critical comments—including some that directly called out departmental leaders who had also been assigned to the peer-focused program—raised alarm. There were worries that criticisms left unaddressed might calcify or find their way to the press. “The risk of not stopping a free-flowing open dialogue is, you don’t have time to address concerns and show that you take the concerns seriously and you are going to make changes as a leader,” said Diggins.

With four weeks’ worth of emails and comments still to come, Gillespie felt torn. The department was already in a fragile state. Should she advocate for the experiment to continue as planned? She had no idea whether the peer-focused program was having a positive or negative effect on morale, much less on the experiences of incarcerated people. What if the attitudes of the most disillusioned and frustrated deputies were contagious? Would she lose more staff? What if the messages normalized insubordinate behavior or policy violations? What if this jeopardized everyone’s safety? She was not sure these were risks the department could afford to take.

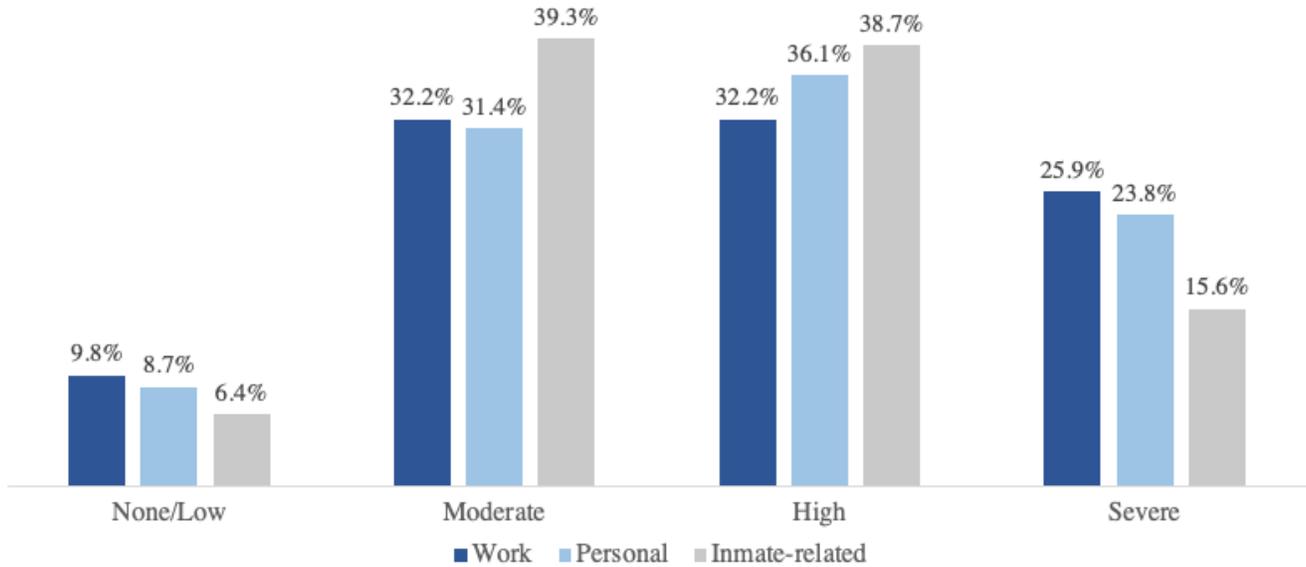
^{xi} Quotes are altered to protect the anonymity of respondents.

Appendices

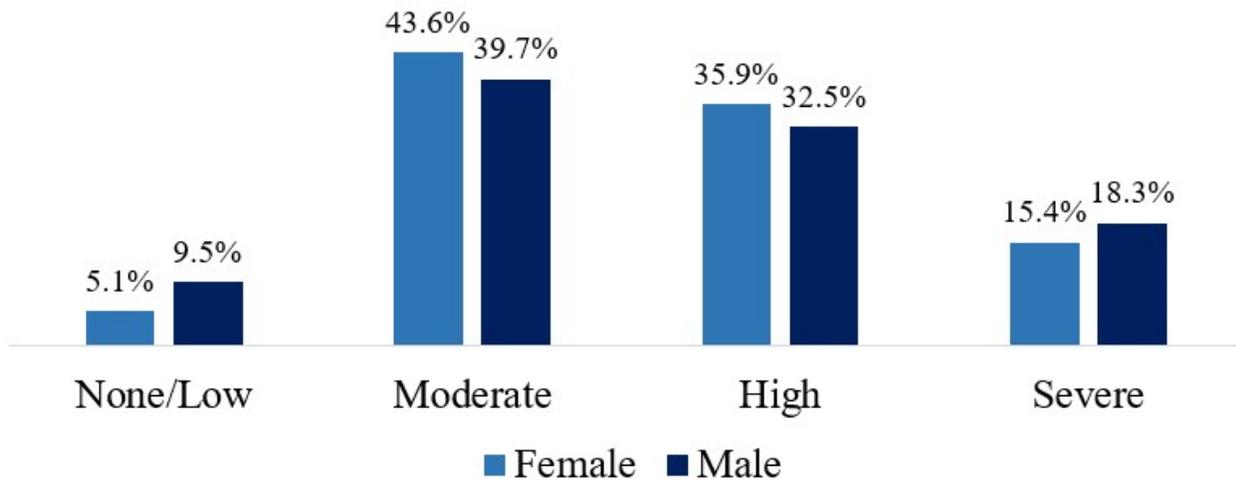
Appendix 1 The People Lab’s Initial Survey Results

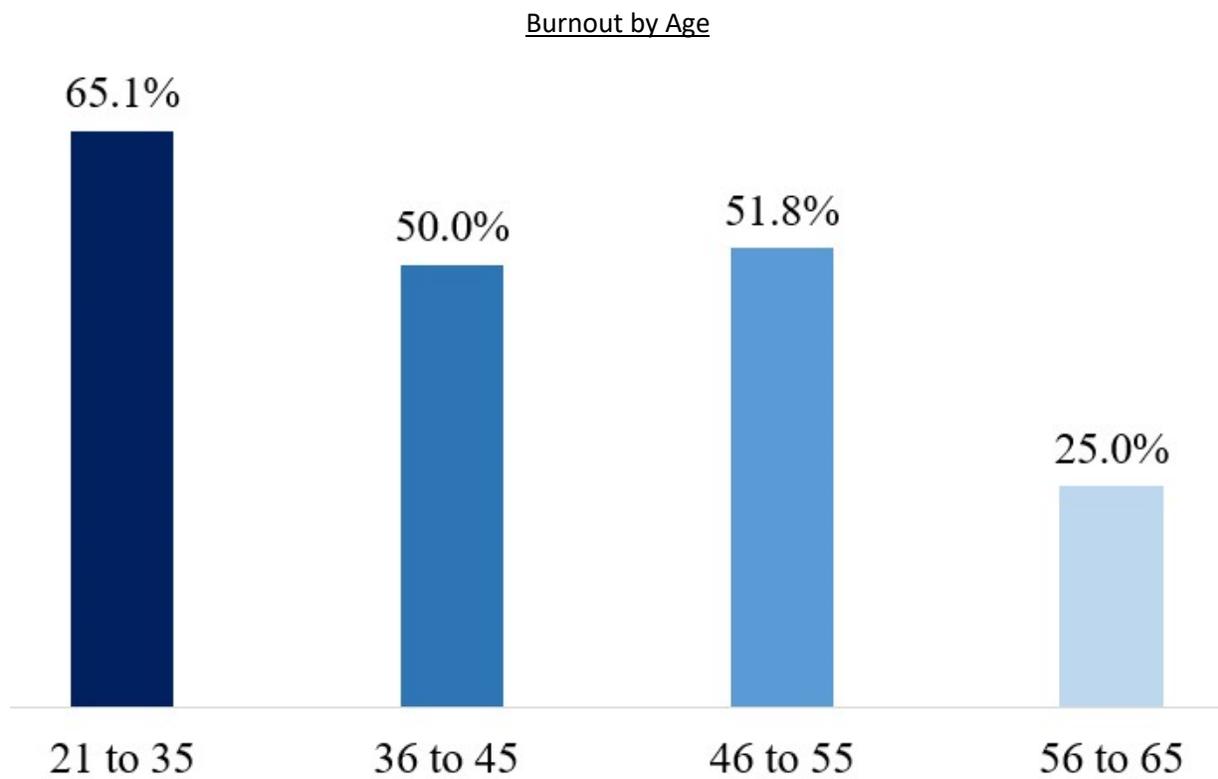
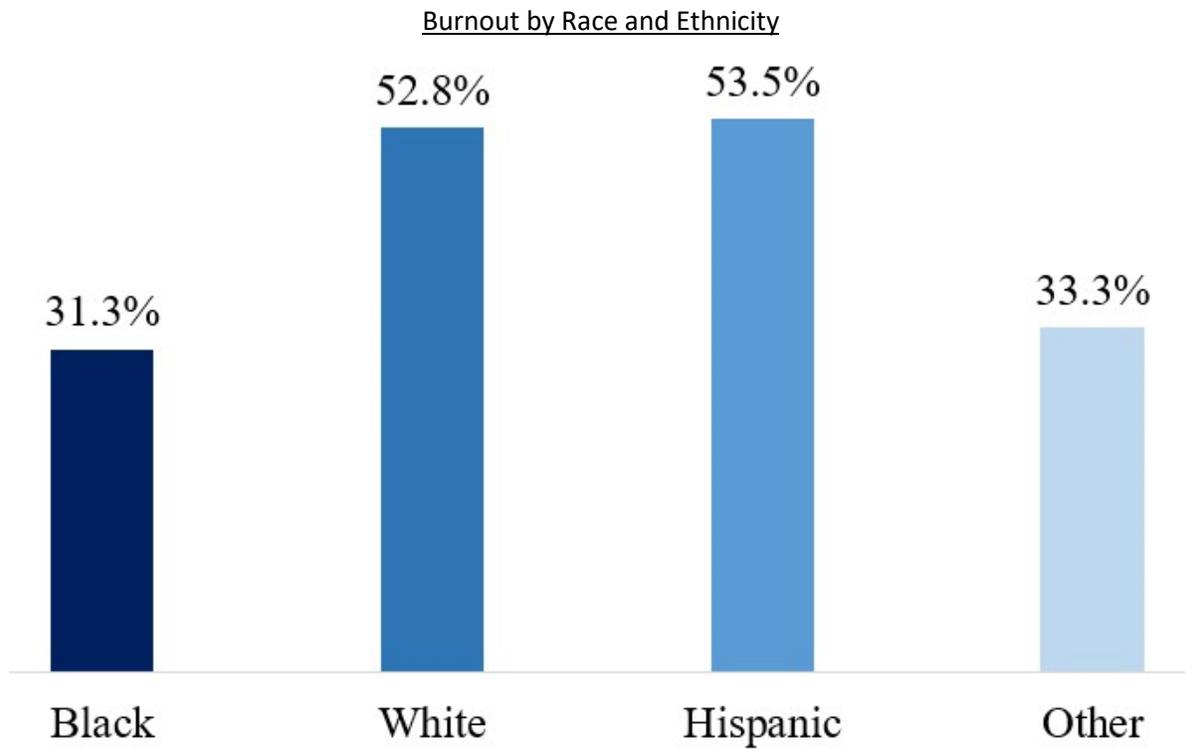
The initial survey conducted by The People Lab in 2019 went out to all the deputies working at DSD. 175 deputies filled out the survey (21 percent response rate).

Reported Levels of Burnout Among Deputies



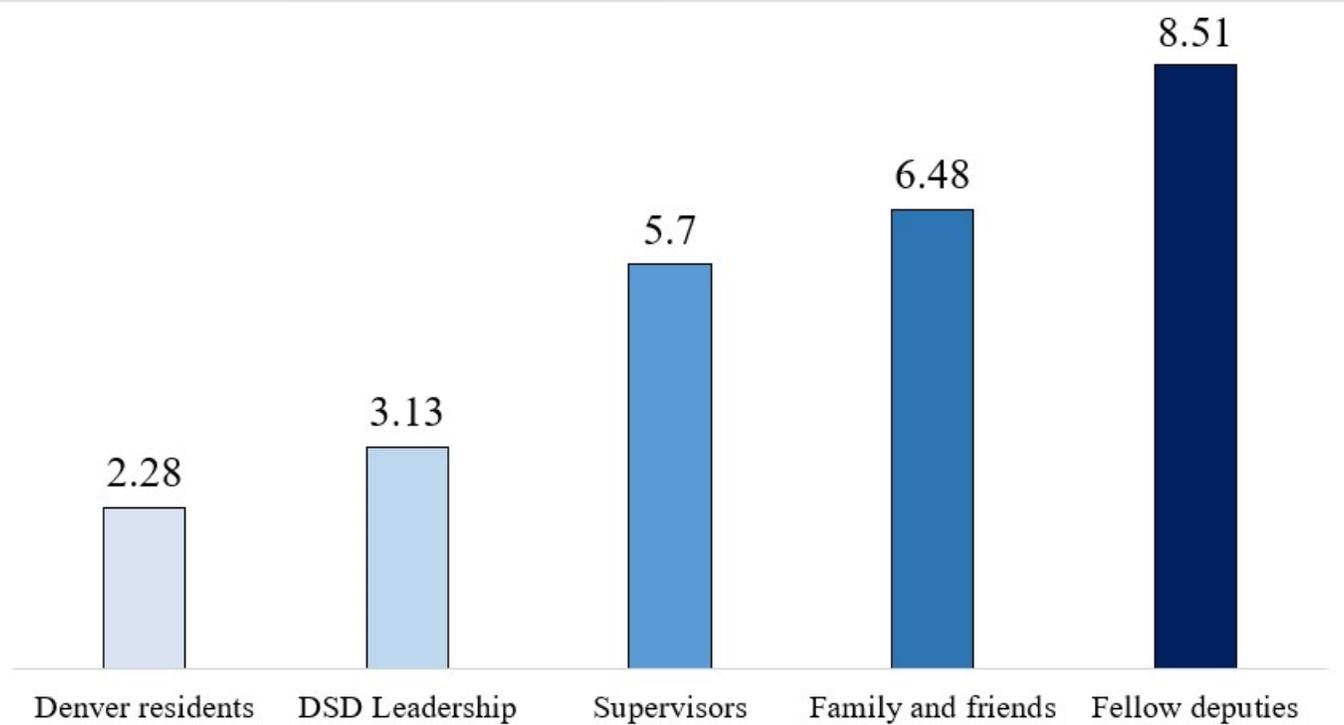
Burnout by Gender





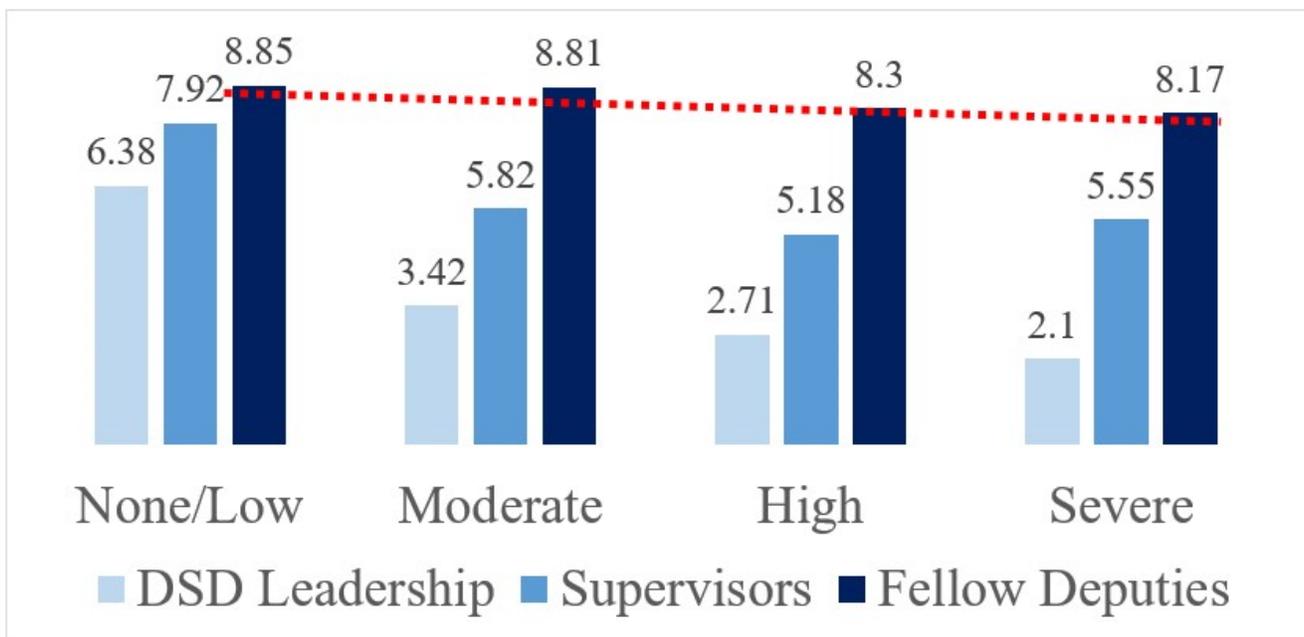
To better understand the causes of burnout, deputies were asked to rate how well different people in their lives understood their day-to-day challenges on a scale of 1-10. The bars represent average scores on this scale.

Burnout and Feeling Understood (Average scores for all deputies)

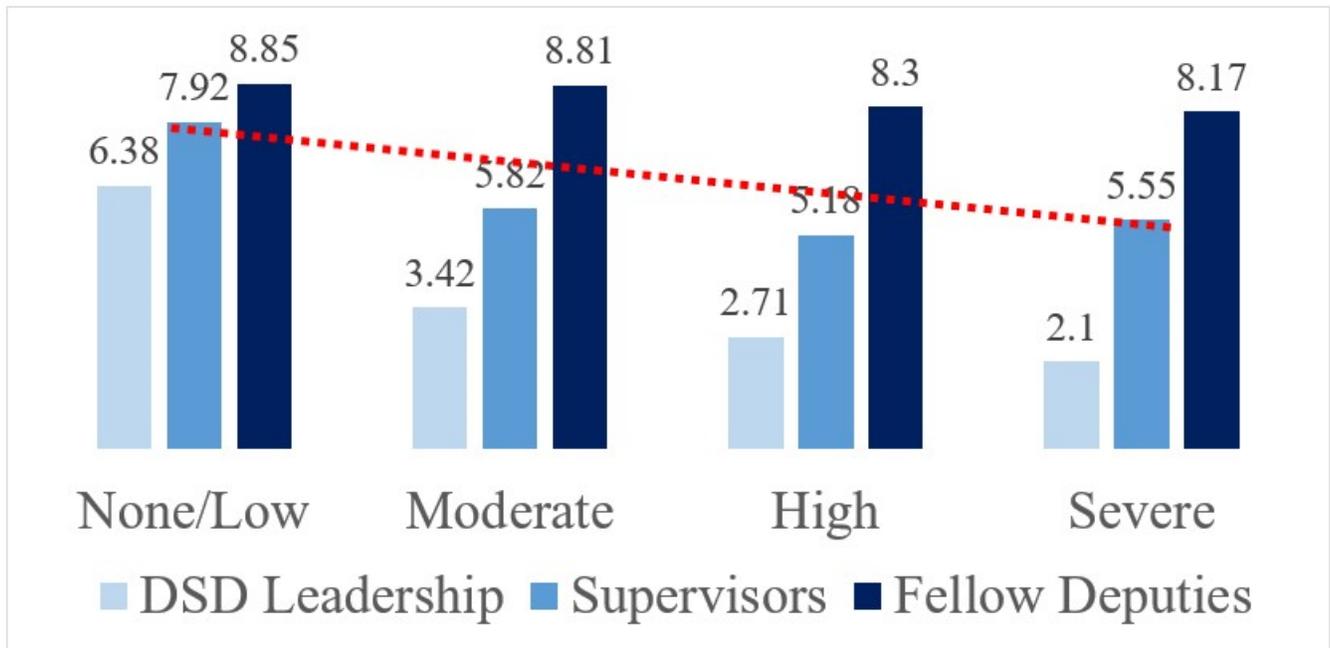


The following graphs compare average scores for the degree of perceived understanding from fellow deputies, supervisors, and department leadership broken out by degree of reported burnout. Lines show change in levels of burnout relative to degree of understanding from each group.

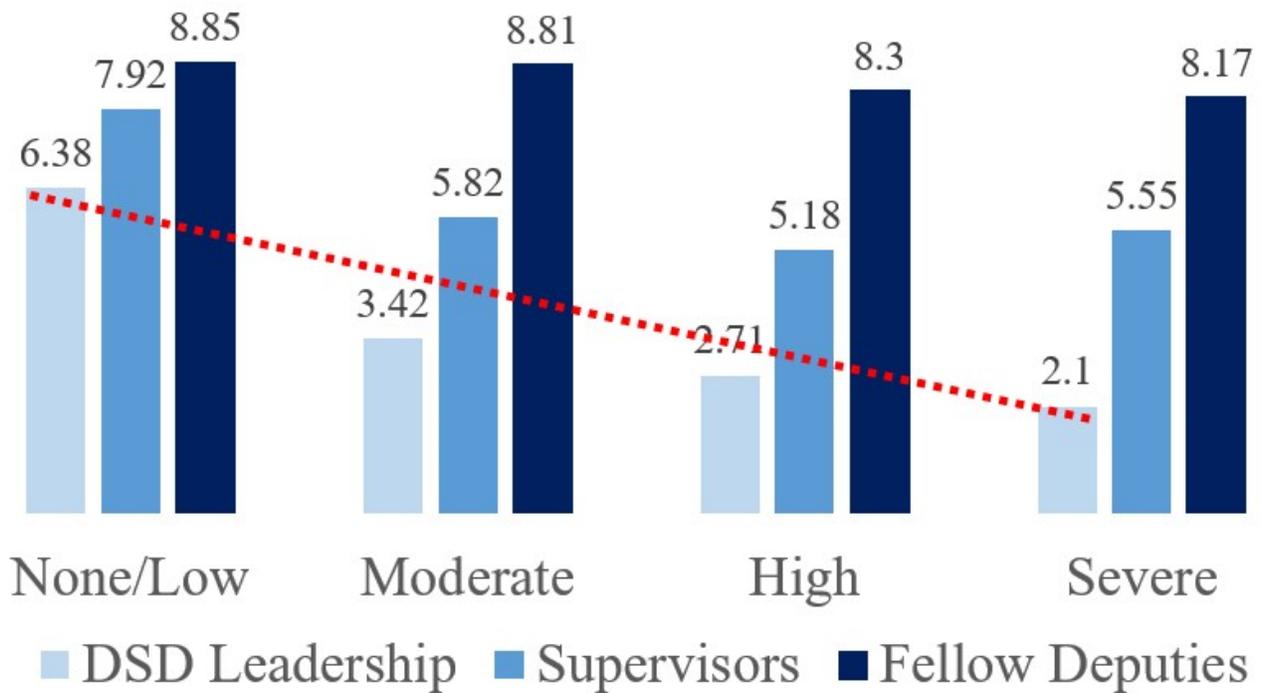
Finding 1: Deputies feel understood by fellow deputies, regardless of their level of burnout.



Finding 2: Deputies who feel less understood by supervisors report higher burnout.



Finding 3: Deputies who feel less understood by DSD leadership report higher burnout.



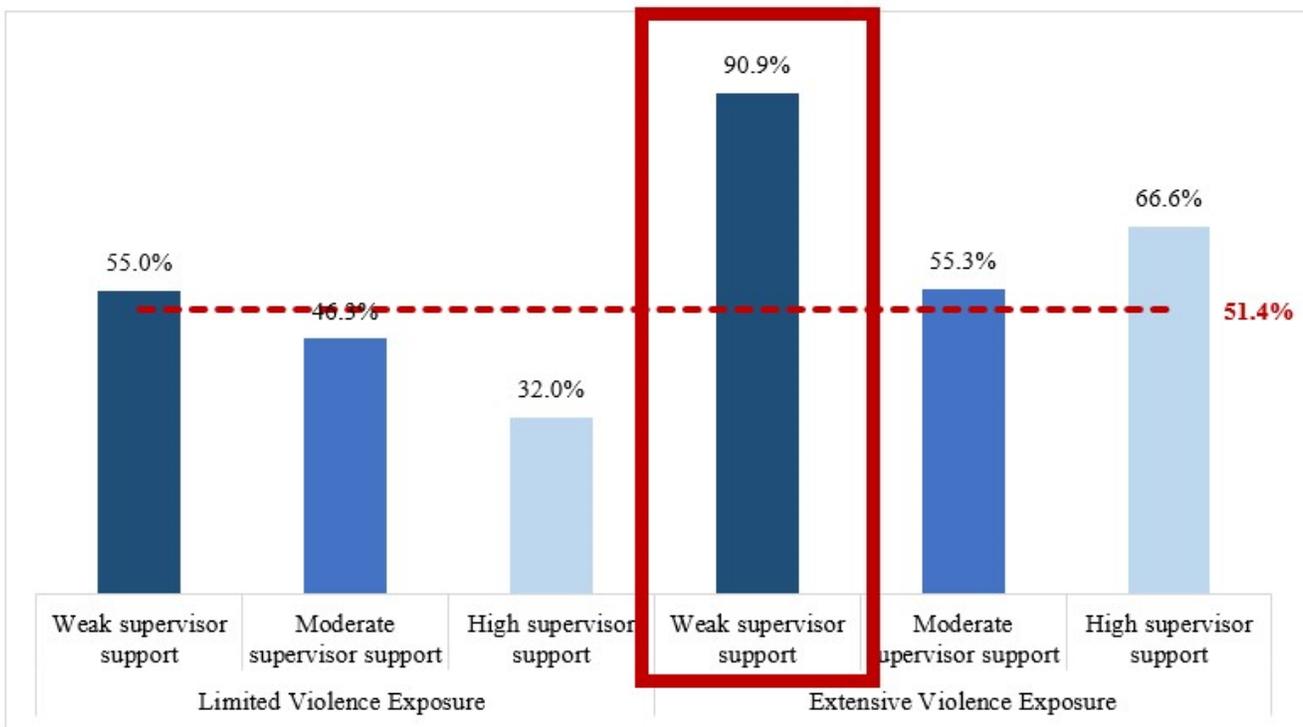
The People Lab also compared burnout levels with degree of exposure to violence and perception of supervisor support, degree of social support, degree of belonging, and degree of comfort using employee assistance programs.

Exposure to Violence

Participants were asked whether they had feared injury (1), seen someone injured or killed (2), and/or been injured themselves (3).

Supervisor support acts as a “buffer” against the trauma of violence

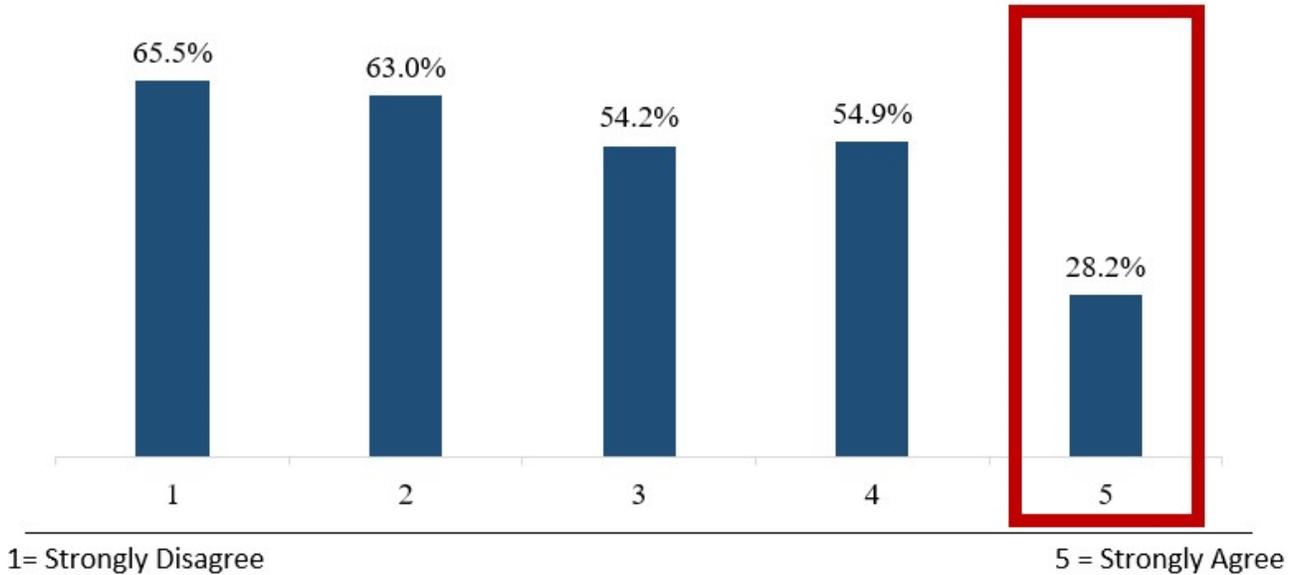
This graph shows the proportion of survey respondents showing high or severe levels of burnout broken out by degree of supervisor support and degree of exposure to violence. Line shows average percentage of respondents showing high or severe levels of burnout.



Social Support

Deputies were asked: *Do you have someone at work you can talk to about your day-to-day problems?*

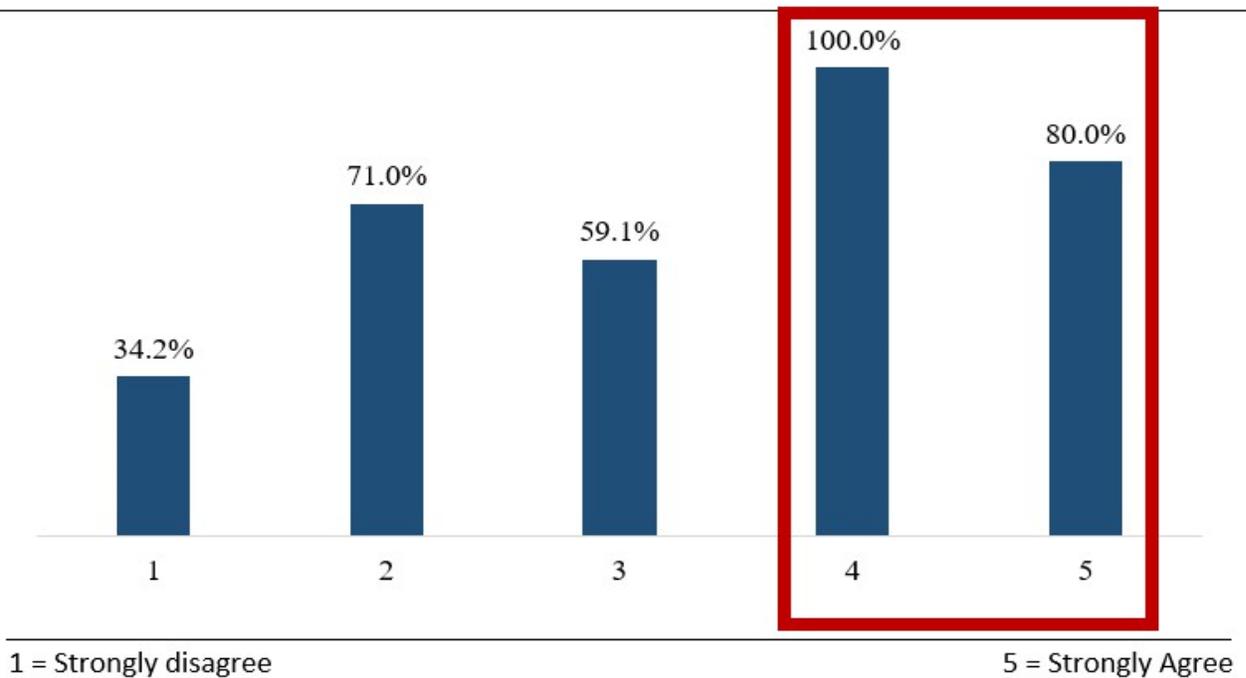
Deputies who say they have someone at work they can talk to about day-to-day problems report lower burnout.



Social Belonging

Deputies were asked to what degree they agreed with the statement *“When something bad happens, I feel like maybe I don’t belong here.”*

Deputies who feel like they don’t belong show higher levels of burnout.

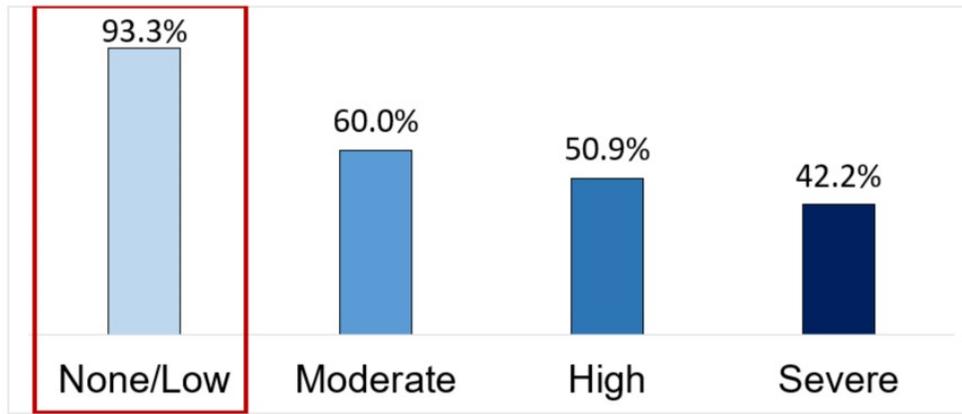


Employee Assistance Program Concerns

Deputies were asked about their level of concern with using the employee assistance program (EAP).

Deputies with lower burnout have fewer concerns with using the EAP.

Graph shows percentage of deputies reporting they are comfortable using the EAP broken out by degree of burnout.



The researchers drew the following conclusions based on this data:

- Overall, deputies feel like *only other deputies* understand what they’re going through.
 - Those that have someone to talk to report lower burnout.
 - Those that feel like they belong in law enforcement report lower burnout.
- Deputies who feel understood by supervisors and leadership report lower burnout.
 - A positive supervisor relationship operates as a “buffer” against the trauma of violence.
 - Deputies who report higher levels of burnout are less likely to trust the EAP.
- Deputies attribute their burnout to work environment (time, leadership, support), not the nature of the job (working with inmates).

Appendix 2 First Four Weeks of Emails**Week 1 Email - Control (Sworn and Civilian)**

Hi,

At DSD, we’re trying something new. Over the next two months, you will receive weekly emails with prompts that invite you to reflect upon various aspects of your physical, social, and mental health, and give you the chance to briefly catalog your thoughts in a platform to which only *you* will have access to. We hope that you enjoy this opportunity to think about ways you can take care of yourself! See this week’s prompt below:

It’s natural to feel overwhelmed at work sometimes as part of the challenging roles we perform. This week, reflect on a challenging circumstance you recently had to navigate, how it made you feel, and how you overcame it.

You can write a note to yourself by clicking [here](#). No one at DSD will have access to the notes that you write to yourself.

[Note: You’ve been selected to receive emails like this because DSD is looking for better ways to support you. If you want to unsubscribe from receiving these emails, click [here](#).]

Week 1 Email - Treatment (Sworn)

Hi,

At DSD, we’re trying something new. Over the next two months, you will receive weekly emails that will invite you to share advice and stories *anonymously* with others in the Department about what it’s like to work at DSD. Once we’ve collected stories, we will upload them onto a common confidential intranet page so you can learn from each other. Thank you for sharing your experiences - it will be especially valuable for new badges!

Sometimes it feels like only other deputies truly understand what it’s like to be a deputy. This week, we would like to ask: what is one aspect of your work at DSD that the public doesn’t understand? What do you wish the public knew about a day in the life of a DSD deputy?

CLICK [HERE](#) to share your thoughts anonymously. Next week, we’ll share what other people wrote with you.

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Week 1 Email - Treatment (Civilian)

Hi,

At DSD, we’re trying something new. Over the next two months, you will receive weekly emails that will invite you to share advice and stories *anonymously* with others in the Department about what it’s like to work at DSD. Once we’ve collected stories, we will upload them onto a common confidential intranet page so you can learn from each other. Thank you for sharing your experiences - it will be especially valuable for new staff!

Sometimes it feels like only other DSD staff truly understand what it’s like to be a DSD staff member. This week, what is one aspect of your work at DSD that the public doesn’t understand? What do you wish the public knew about a day in the life of a DSD staff member?

CLICK [HERE](#) to share your thoughts anonymously. Next week, we’ll share what other people wrote with you.

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Week 2 Email - Control (Sworn and Civilian)

Hi,

Sometimes, difficult situations can be an opportunity for growth. This week, we ask you to reflect on a challenging circumstance you recently had to navigate, how it made you feel, and how you overcame it.

You can write a note to yourself by clicking [here](#). No one at DSD will have access to the notes that you write to yourself.

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Week 2 Email - Treatment (Sworn)

Hi,

We received great advice from many of you last week. You can check them out [here](#). One comment really stuck with me: [Peer comment]

Everyone needs someone they can lean on when times get tough. **This week, think about the person that you go to when you just need to vent at work. What makes this person a good support?**

CLICK [HERE](#) to share your story anonymously.

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Week 2 Email - Treatment (Civilian)

Hi,

We received great advice from many of you last week. You can check them out [here](#). One comment really stuck with me: [Peer comment]

Everyone needs someone they can lean on when times get tough. **This week, think about the person that you go to when you just need to vent at work. What makes this person a good support?**

CLICK [HERE](#) to share your story anonymously.

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Week 3 Email – Control (Sworn and Civilian)

Hi,

We would like for you to feel strong and to have the energy to accomplish your goals both at work and in your private life. Take a moment now to reflect on what resources or activities help give you the energy to reach your goals on any given day. What keeps you going?

You can write a note to yourself by clicking [here](#). No one at DSD will have access to the notes that you write to yourself.

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Week 3 Email - Treatment (Sworn)

Hi,

I felt inspired by what one of our colleagues shared last week about who supports them at work: [Peer comment]

There are many more touching stories for you to get to know your fellow deputies better [here](#).

Starting a new job can be overwhelming, and starting a new job at DSD is no exception. This week, think about when you first started on the job. What’s one piece of advice that you got (or you wish you got) that you can share with new badges today?

Share your advice anonymously by **CLICKING [HERE](#)**.

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Week 3 Email - Treatment (Civilian)

Hi,

I felt inspired by what one of our colleagues shared last week about who supports them at work: [Peer comment]

There are many more touching stories for you to get to know your fellow coworkers better [here](#).

Starting a new job can be overwhelming, and starting a new job at DSD is no exception. This week, think about when you first started on the job. What’s one piece of advice that you got (or you wish you got) that you can share with new hires today?

Share your advice anonymously by **CLICKING [HERE](#)**.

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Week 4 Email – Control (Sworn and Civilian)

Hi,

A healthy body needs to have the companionship of a healthy mind. Having some time to collect our thoughts or to decompress from a hard day on the job helps us muster the strength of spirit to face our challenges. This week, we would like you to take some time to write down what was difficult to deal with this week and how you will help yourself decompress.

You can write a note to yourself by clicking [here](#). No one at DSD will have access to the notes that you write to yourself.

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Week 4 Email - Treatment (Sworn)

Hi,

Last week, your colleagues shared a lot of great advice that would help someone who is just starting out, including this: [Peer comment]

You can access more stories from fellow deputies by clicking [here](#).

As deputies, we work the toughest beat there is. Think about a time when a fellow deputy helped you navigate an emotionally challenging situation at work. How would you offer support to someone in a similar situation?

You can share your advice anonymously with your fellow deputies by **CLICKING [HERE](#)**.

[Note: You’ve been selected to receive emails like this because DSD is looking for better ways to support you. If you want to unsubscribe from receiving these emails, click [here](#).]

Week 4 Email - Treatment (Civilian)

Hi,

Last week, your colleagues shared a lot of great advice that would help someone who is just starting out, including this: [Peer comment]

You can access more stories from fellow coworkers by clicking [here](#).

As DSD employees, we go through a lot together. Think about a time when a coworker helped you navigate an emotionally challenging situation at work. How would you offer support to someone in a similar situation?

You can share your advice anonymously with your fellow coworkers by **CLICKING [HERE](#)**.

[Note: You’ve been selected to receive emails like this because DSD is looking for better ways to support you. If you want to unsubscribe from receiving these emails, click [here](#).]

Appendix 3

Indicators and Outcomes

(Note: The People Lab did not end up utilizing all measures as indicators.)

BURNOUT

Please read each statement carefully and decide if you ever feel this way about your job.

Options: Never, A few times a year or less, Once a month or less, A few times a month, Once a week, Every day

I feel emotionally drained from my work.

I feel used up at the end of the workday.

I feel tried when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.

Working all day is really a strain for me.

I can effectively solve the problems that arise in my work.

I feel burned out from my work.

I feel I am making an effective contribution to what this organization does.

I have become less interested in my work since I started this job.

I have become less interested in my work since I started this job.

I have become less enthusiastic about my work.

In my opinion, I am good at my job.

I feel exhilarated when I accomplish something at work.

At my work, I feel confident that I am effective at getting things done.

BELONGING

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements below, from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree

I feel connected with people I work with.

When something bad happens at work, I feel that maybe I don't belong here.

There is someone at work I can talk about my day to day problems if I need to.

I feel valued at work.

I feel listened to at work.

I feel like I belong at work.

The leadership at DSD recognizes the importance of my work.

My coworkers recognize the importance of my work.

SELF-EFFICACY

Please select the response that best applies to you.

Options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree

I will be able to successfully overcome many challenges.

Even when things are tough, I can perform quite well.

ATTITUDES

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree

I feel respected by inmates.

Inmates are generally reckless.

Inmates are not dangerous.

Inmates share my values and beliefs.

It is important for DSD members to build trusting relationships with the community.

The job of a jail is to keep the public safe, not to help inmates.

Inmates should have access to academic training and vocational training.
Inmates should have access to drug and alcohol treatment.

If you had to guess, of the people DSD serves, what percentage are in jail primarily as a result of their personal failings (versus primarily the result of circumstances that are beyond their control)?

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100



SITUATIONAL AND DISPOSITIONAL INDICES

In your opinion, how much do these factors contribute to the reason the average inmate is in jail?

Options: None, A little, A lot, All

- Lack of strong families and networks
- Lack of economic opportunity
- Bad luck
- Bad personal choices
- Societal factors
- Mental health challenges
- Bad moral decisions

HAPPINESS

On a scale from 1-10 (with 10 being the happiest), how would you rate your happiness with your job at DSD?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Endnotes

- ¹ Sonya Gillespie, interview with authors, August 16, 2023. All quotes from Gillespie are from this interview unless otherwise noted.
- ² Caterina G. Spinaris, Michael D. Denhof, and Julie A. Kellaway, *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in United States Corrections Professionals: Prevalence and Impact on Health Functioning*, report (Florence, CO: Desert Waters Correctional Outreach), 2012.
- ³ Spinaris, Denhof, Kellaway, *Posttraumatic Stress*.
- ⁴ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "About Criminal and Juvenile Justice," accessed September 25, 2023 at <https://www.samhsa.gov/criminal-juvenile-justice/about#:~:text=It%20is%20estimated%20that%2063,often%20incarceration%20exacerbates%20their%20symptoms>; Gergo Baranyi, Megan Cassidy, et al., "Prevalence of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Prisoners," *Epidemiologic Reviews* 40(1), 2018, 134–145, <https://doi.org/10.1093/epirev/mxx015>; Annual Report 2022; Prison Policy Initiative, "Health," accessed September 26, 2023 at <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/health.html#:~:text=People%20in%20prisons%20and%20jails,use%20and%20mental%20health%20problems>; Laurin Bixby, Stacey Bevan, and Courtney Boen, "The Links Between Disability, Incarceration, and Social Exclusion," *Health Affairs* 40, no. 10, October 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2022.00495>; Leigh Ann Davis, "People with Intellectual Disabilities in the Criminal Justice Systems: Victims and Suspects," *The Arc*, accessed September 26, 2023 at <https://thearc.org/wp-content/uploads/forchapters/Criminal%20Justice%20System.pdf>.
- ⁵ Denver Sheriff Department, *Annual Report 2022*, Department of Public Safety, 2023, 13, www.denvergov.org/files/assets/public/sheriff-department/documents/annual-report-2022-final.pdf.
- ⁶ Esteban L. Hernandez, "Denver Law Enforcement Watchdog Report Highlights Major Concerns," *Newstex Blogs Axios*, March 15, 2023.
- ⁷ Data provided to The People Lab in 2019 by the Denver Sheriff Department.
- ⁸ Elias Diggins, interview with authors, September 27, 2023. All quotes from Diggins are from this interview unless otherwise noted.
- ⁹ Denver Sheriff Department, *Annual Report 2017*, Department of Public Safety, accessed at <https://www.scribd.com/document/386110831/Denver-Sheriff-Department-2017-Annual-Report>.
- ¹⁰ Elias Diggins, Eli Gage, and April Pottorff, "Promoting Gender Equity Through Jail Design with Denver Sheriff Elias Diggins," in *360 Justice*, produced by CGL, podcast, 48:56, <https://cglcompanies.com/podcast/promoting-gender-equity-through-jail-design-with-denver-sheriff-elias-diggins/>.
- ¹¹ Diggins, Gage, Pottorff, "Promoting Gender Equity."
- ¹² Citizen Oversight Board letter to Sheriff Patrick Firman, November 15, 2017, accessed at https://www.denvergov.org/content/dam/denvergov/Portals/64/documents/2017.11.15_Nursing%20Mothers%20Letter_Final.pdf.
- ¹³ Mariel Padilla, "Woman Gave Birth in Denver Jailcell Alone, Lawsuit Says," *New York Times*, September 1, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/01/us/diana-sanchez-birth-denver-jail.html>.
- ¹⁴ Jennifer Brown, "Denver Jail Transgender Policy a National Model," *The Denver Post*, June 27, 2015, <https://www.denverpost.com/2015/06/27/denver-jail-transgender-policy-a-national-model/>.
- ¹⁵ Anusha Roy, "Denver Jail's Multi-million Makeover Could Make Change," *9News*, DeDech<https://www.9news.com/article/news/local/next/denver-jail-multi-million-makeover-could-make-change/73-cddbcbac-7b7b-4a80-a266-8a4ce1b8b257>.
- ¹⁶ "State Justice Martinez Named Denver Safety Manager," *The Associated Press State & Local Wire*, August 24, 2011.
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- ¹⁹ Independent Monitor, *The Death of Michael Marshall*
- ²⁰ ACLU Colorado, "Michael Marshall's Death at the Denver Jail Ruled a Homicide. Why Was He There in the First Place?" January 26, 2016, accessed September 26, 2019 at <https://www.aclu-co.org/en/news/michael-marshalls-death-denver-jail-ruled-homicide-why-was-he-there-first-place-1>.

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- ²¹ Walker and Walker v. City and County of Denver, Denver Sheriff’s Department, Case 1:15cv02539 – Document 1 (D. Colo. 2015), accessed at <https://www.westword.com/news/intentional-masturbation-sex-harassing-horrors-in-female-deputies-lawsuit-7359842>.
- ²² Eddy et al. v. City and County of Denver, Denver Sheriff’s Department, Case 1:16cv01678 – Document 1 (D. Colo. 2016), accessed at <https://www.westword.com/news/die-woman-more-female-guards-describe-denver-jail-as-house-of-horrors-8115880>.
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- ²⁶ Andrea Albo, interview with Gaylen Moore, September 21, 2023.
- ²⁷ Andrea Albo, email correspondence with Gaylen Moore, October 6, 2023. All quotes from Albo are from this correspondence unless otherwise noted.
- ²⁸ Kim Desmond, interview with authors, August 16, 2023. All quotes from Desmond are from this interview unless otherwise noted.
- ²⁹ Jessica Harney, interview with Gaylen Moore, July 31, 2023. All quotes from Harney are from this interview unless otherwise noted. ³⁰ Noelle Phillips, “Denver Sheriff Department Celebrates Reforms While Critics Remain Skeptical,” *The Denver Post*, August 27, 2018, <https://www.denverpost.com/2018/08/27/denver-sheriff-department-reforms/>.
- ³¹ Phillips, “Denver Sheriff Department.”
- ³² United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), “New Study Finds Rising VA Employee Engagement Key to Increased Success at Nearly 150 Medical Centers,” VA press release, March 26, 2019, <https://news.va.gov/press-room/new-study-finds-rising-va-employee-engagement-key-to-increased-success-at-nearly-150-medical-centers/>.
- ³³ Courtney Williams, interview with Gaylen Moore, August 17, 2023.
- ³⁴ Zach McDade, interview with Gaylen Moore, August 24, 2023. All quotes from McDade are from this interview unless otherwise noted. ³⁵ Elizabeth Linos, Krista Ruffini, and Stephanie Wilcoxon, “Reducing Burnout and Resignations Among Frontline Workers: A Field Experiment (July 5, 2021),” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (forthcoming).
- ³⁶ Jessica Harney, email correspondence with Gaylen Moore, September 20, 2023.
- ³⁷ David Sachs, “Denver’s Jail Population is Drastically Shrinking, but that Alone Can’t Stop Deputies and Inmates from Getting Coronavirus,” *Denverite*, April 20, 2020, <https://denverite.com/2020/04/20/denvers-jail-population-is-drastically-shrinking-but-inmates-and-deputies-are-far-from-immune-to-coronavirus/>.
- ³⁸ Sachs, “Denver’s Jail Population.”
- ³⁹ Jessie Harney, Elizabeth Linos, et al. “Improving Wellbeing Through Social Support and Belonging: A Pilot Program with Deputies and Civilian Staff of Denver Sheriff Department,” policy brief, The People Lab, 2023.
- ⁴⁰ Elizabeth Linos, Krista Ruffini, and Stephanie Wilcoxon, “Reducing Burnout and Resignations Among Frontline Workers: A Field Experiment (July 5, 2021),” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, forthcoming, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3846860> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3846860>.
- ⁴¹ Daria Serna, interview with Gaylen Moore, August 16, 2023. All quotes from Serna are from this interview unless otherwise noted.
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