

DOCUMENTATION AND BURNOUT

A Study of Documentation and Burnout at a Non-Profit Organization

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Strength lies in differences,  
not in similarities.

-Stephen R. Covey quoted on Twitter March 7, 2012



Empowering people to live life as they define it.

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*Ten years ago, I wrote in my journal the words “Vanderbilt Peabody College” and “doctorate.” It was my dream to attend such a prestigious and world-renowned university to accomplish my goal of becoming Dr. Wasserman. Dreams do come true, and I will always be grateful for having the opportunity to accomplish my goals. I learned a lot about myself along this journey, but most of all to have confidence in myself and persist even when things are tough. I could not have accomplished my goal without the help and support of the Vanderbilt Peabody Online professors, my Student Success Advisors Erin and Katelynn, and my family and friends.*

*To my dad-Thank you for your constant support and encouragement along the way You have been my biggest cheerleader!*

*To my sister-Thank you for supporting me and providing me with words of wisdom to inspire me to keep going.*

*To my brother, Sarah, and nephew Ben- Your support and encouragement in this process have meant so much.*

*To Marcey and family-Thank you for keeping me sane and laughing along the way!*

*To my Nana -Thank you for all your support, love, encouragement, and positivity.*

*To my family-Thank you all for being my cheerleaders.*

*To my friends and colleagues-Thank you for your encouragement.*

*DREAM BIG!*

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### Executive Summary

You are a leader in your organization, and you have just left a staff meeting that uncovered that your staff is overwhelmed with paperwork, and some workers are beginning to feel burnout with the job. What do you do? This study addresses this problem in a non-profit organization and aims to identify and recommend steps leaders can take to address these common issues. Using the data collected, I provide findings and recommendations to the partner organization. The environment analyzed in this study is a non-profit organization called Empower Cherokee. Serving 124 individuals who have developmental disabilities, the organization strives to provide job and life skills to individuals learning to integrate into the community. Located in Cherokee County, Georgia, Empower Cherokee uses a Person-Centered Planning Process to support clients in having a voice and choice in what is important to them in their daily lives. Interviews with support staff revealed that there is too much documentation and paperwork and an overall feeling of burnout.

To further understand burnout, I reviewed literature on excessive documentation and its effects on employees, as well as empirical theories related to job stress. The problem experienced by the organization and analysis of the literature led to the design of three primary research questions.

1. What is the current structure of timely and accurate completion of documentation practices?
2. What do administration/staff understand about documentation procedures?
3. In what ways does paperwork contribute to burn out?

A mixed-methods approach was utilized to explore these questions. Interviews with Empower Cherokee support staff were conducted. After coding the data, this information gave way to important themes and patterns. The Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) was sent to support staff via email to measure three types of burnout: work-related, client-related, and personal. The interviews and survey data brought about definitive insights from which the following findings emerged:

1. Inconsistent documentation practices
2. Understanding of what to document
3. Understanding why to document
4. Staff do not ask for help
5. Impact of excessive workload
6. Burnout experienced by staff

Drawing upon these findings, realistic and attainable recommendations were offered to Empower Cherokee to address the documentation and burnout challenges. My recommendations include the following:

1. Setting and communicating clear expectations
2. Assigning a mentor to support staff as a source of help

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3. Assessing workload expectations and reevaluate necessary paperwork/documentation demands
4. Providing rewards and recognition to employees
5. Strengthening employee relationships
6. Focusing on fairness
7. Promoting value

Given the many challenges organizations are faced with today, excessive documentation and burnout remain at the top of the list for some professions. Empower Cherokee's challenges are no exception. Pertinent insight into the perceptions of support staff as well as notable data were discussed in the findings. The recommendations given will provide Empower Cherokee an opportunity to fully support its staff and adjust its practices based on the challenges it faces. Empower Cherokee has a reputation of working together when faced with trials and will continue to thrive and be successful within its community.

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### Overview of Organization

Using a theoretical framework, I collected data and provided findings and recommendations. The suggested recommendations are practical and logical for this organization to implement. Setting and communicating clear expectations, providing mentors, and addressing the six risk factors that lead to burnout will improve employee productivity and minimize work-related burnout among employees. The organization is known for continually providing training and support services for its individuals' independence on campus, in the workplace, and in the community.

Empower Cherokee currently supports 124 men and women with intellectual and developmental disabilities through contracts, donated funds, and grants. The organization was incorporated as private and non-profit in January 1969 by concerned parents seeking the development of services and community-based opportunities for persons with developmental disabilities. Cherokee Day Training Center Inc. was the original name of the organization and, in 2019, the organization changed its name to Empower Cherokee to ensure alignment to the organizational vision and community expectations.

Empower Cherokee provides Cherokee County residents with support for individuals with developmental disabilities for employment, volunteering, social activities, and skill development (Empower Cherokee, 2019). The organization is accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) and currently employs 30 staff members. Located in northwest Georgia, this organization currently serves 124 individuals, of which 77 are male and 47 are female, and supports individuals in a range of age from 22 to end of life. There is a wide variety of age groups: 55% are 18-40, 38% are 41-65, and 7% are 66-85 years old. Empower Cherokee also serves a diverse population with 77% White, 11% African American, 10% Asian or other, and 2% Hispanic. Levels of communication vary: 61% of clients are verbal, 30% are partially verbal, and 8% are nonverbal. Most (75%) of Empower Cherokee's clients have full mobility, while 14% walk with assistance, 7% use a wheelchair, and 4% use a walker. Required supervision levels also vary: 69% require on-site supervision, 20% require line-of-sight supervision, 8% require 24/7 supervision, and 3% can never be left unattended.

The organization provides individuals with employment and community engagement services, as well as social support services. Of the 30 staff members, 22 are employed at the main campus. The main campus employees include nine Community Access Group staff, four Supported Employment staff, five Community Access Individual staff, one Office Manager, one Business Manager, and two Case Managers. The organization provides a combination of Employment and Community Access Services through two campuses. Empower Cherokee focuses on providing person-centered practices and the development of personal goals of individuals they support. The services provided focus on how the individuals they support can interact with their community, including how to be engaged, valued, and employed. Person-centered practices give individuals the ability to choose what they are interested in. In addition, they ensure that the individual has access to hobbies, friends, family, employment, and social opportunities.

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### **Problem of Practice**

Empower Cherokee faces low employee retention rates that can be traced to excessive paperwork, causing staff to feel overwhelmed and stressed. The organization's SWOT analysis completed in 2020 noted high turnover rates as a significant weakness. Efforts to retain staff have been impacted by the lack of raises and the inability to be fully staffed, which puts more responsibilities on an already strained staff. According to staff surveys, data revealed that staff are feeling stressed and overwhelmed. In addition, excessive demands from oversight entities regarding documentation were identified as a threat to the organization.

Specializing in meeting the needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities, the organization maintains contracts with the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities as well as the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency. In addition, the organization maintains accreditation through CARF. These overseeing entities require constant maintenance of documentation to ensure the organization's compliance with state and federal guidelines. Due to these requirements, paperwork and documentation are an essential part of the staff's responsibilities—in addition to providing supports and services to the individuals in a number of areas.

Safeguarding the need to maintain accurate and timely documentation may be putting added stress to an already strained staff, which could cause them to feel work-related burnout. If Empower Cherokee does not address this problem, it could see continued employee retention problems. By relying on both qualitative and quantitative data, the organization can better identify stressors and develop measures focused on documentation and work-related burnout, which would address the retention weakness.

### **Literature Review**

Research on stress is far-reaching and dates to the early 19th century. A well-known and important pioneer of stress research, Walter Bradford Cannon, a psychologist and professor at Harvard, discovered the stress response and coined the term "fight or flight response" in 1929. It wasn't until 1978 when Hans Selye, an endocrinologist known for his research on stress and stress theory, began to incorporate the term stress into medical language and explained these phenomena in his famous book, *The Stress of Life*. In the book, Selye discusses the concept of stress and refers to his many studies on the effects of stress on the human body. Although research on stress was extensive, research on work stress did not have the same popularity. It wasn't until the early 1960s when studies of work stress started to take shape, emanating from researchers like Cannon (1929) and Selye (1978), which introduced a new era of work stress exploration and development.

One of the very first work stress research programs began at the University of Michigan's Institute of Social Research in the early 1960s. Kahn and French (1962) reviewed the research findings from the work stress program and highlighted significant outcomes. The results of the work led to conclusions that the work environment has a powerful impact on one's mental and physical health. Researchers began to consider the stressors contributing to work stress and established general categories for them. There are several widely accepted categories of job

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stressors, with the most prevalent ones being role conflict, role ambiguity, and work overload (Beehr & Newman, 1978; Etzion et al., 1998; House, 1983; Kahn et al., 1964), all of which exist in almost every profession.

Role conflict is a known job stressor and is defined as conflicting demands or expectations of a person in relation to their work (Kahn et al., 1964; Rizzo, 1970). This can occur when a worker is asked to do contradictory tasks or to take on multiple roles within the organization. For example, in the healthcare field, role conflict can occur when nurses are given more patients than they can handle at one time, therefore causing the effectiveness of their work to become strained (Tunc & Kutanis, 2009).

Role ambiguity, which is identified as the lack of defining job roles and responsibilities, can lead to job stress (Kahn et al., 1964; King, 1990; Rizzo, 1970). In the healthcare field, this could be a nurse who is performing the task or responsibility of the doctor without clearly knowing what the expectations are in this role. This type of job stressor can create dissatisfaction with the job and cause burnout to take place (Rizzo, 1970). Subsequently, role ambiguity is the result of the absence of clarity of job roles and responsibilities from organizational leaders.

A main stressor for healthcare professionals is workload/overload (Leijten et al., 2015; Kuo et al., 2015; Sesemann, 2019). Healthcare professionals are under a considerable amount of pressure and are experiencing increased patient loads, resulting in a significant increase in their workload. When referring to the construct of workload, it is thought of as the amount of work to be completed by an individual. In the healthcare field specifically, workload can refer to number of patients, amount of paperwork, or hours of care per patient (Alghamdi, 2016; Fishbein, 2019). Workload can impact the quality of care given by a healthcare professional (Fishbein, 2019; Holden et al., 2011; Leiter & Maslach, 2005; Portoghese et al., 2014). Excessive work stress can be detrimental to a healthcare worker's mental health, so much so that there have been studies concluding that it can lead to burnout.

A review of the empirical research revealed several prominent occupational stress theories. Certain stress theories focus on the demands of the job and the decisions made at work. The Demand-Control-Support Model (Karasek, 1979) explains that workers who are faced with stressful job demands or decisions are affected psychologically in a negative way. Other stress theories support workers being rewarded or recognized for their hard work and achievements to their job. Siegrist's Effort-Reward-Imbalance Model (1986) claims that when workers are putting a lot of effort into their jobs but not getting the rewards or recognitions they deserve job stress can result.

Still other stress theories are more focused on the individual and how they fit in with the job role they have. The Person-Environment-Fit Model (Holland, 1959) explains that workers are better suited for certain jobs than others, and if they are not well suited for the job, job stress may occur. Hackman and Oldham's Job Characteristics Model (1976) explores the tasks or responsibilities a worker is given and their motivation to do those tasks. A more recent theory of occupational stress, The Job Demands-Resources Model designed by Demerouti and Bakker

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(2001), suggests that the demands of a worker’s job can lead to burnout if the resources are not adequately provided.

Work stress can also be associated with the terms “job stress” or “occupational stress.” In a publication by the Department of Health and Human Services in 1999, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defined work stress as “the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker” (p. 6). Burman and Goswami (2018) noted various definitions of work stress (see Table 1) from a variety of authors. The common thread between these definitions is that the stress from work can have some level of impact on a person’s mental health.

**Table 1**

Work Stress Definitions (Burman & Goswami, 2018)

Work Stress Definitions	
Comish R. & Swindle B. (1994)	Occupational stress, in particular, is the inability to cope with pressures in a job, because of a poor fit between someone’s abilities and his/her work requirements and conditions. It is a mental and physical condition which affect an individual’s productivity, effectiveness, personal health and quality of work
European Commission, DG, guidance on work– related stress (1999)	Work stress is the emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physiological reaction to aversive and noxious aspects of work, work environments and work organizations. It is a state characterized by high levels of arousal and distress often by feelings of not coping’.
European Commission, Directorate- General for Employment and Social Affairs (2000)	Job stress refers to the emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physiological reaction to aversive and noxious aspects of work, work environments and work organizations. It is a state characterized by high levels of arousal and distress and often by feelings of not coping.
Dollar et al., (2001)	Work stress is transitional arousal state between objective stressors and strain where strain is reaction to the condition of stress.
Malta, (2004)	Occupational stress is any discomfort which is felt and perceived at a personal level and triggered by instances, events or situations that are too intense and frequent in nature so as to exceed a person’s coping capabilities and resources to handle them adequate.
Holmlund-Rytkönen, M., & Strandvik, T. (2005)	It’s as an inability of an individual to meet the demands from job due to the imbalance in the person-environment perceptions. It is the situation where individuals’ job performance, both physical and mental health, is affected poorly.
P. Anna Raja and Nima M Joseph., (2007)	Work stress means "the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of a job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the worker".

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Chen, J. C., & Silverthorne, C. (2008)	Labeled job stress as a work-related psychological pressure and a worker's ability to respond and grip the specific situation at work place skillfully.
Salami O. S. (2010)	Occupational stress can be defined as the experience of unpleasant negative emotions such as tension, anxiety, frustration, anger and depression resulting from aspects of work.
Yan, H., & Xie, S. (2016)	Work stress is defined as a series of physiological, psychological and behavioral responses due to the continuing effects of one or more stressors on individuals in an organization.

While several definitions exist for work stress, the definition of burnout was established and then expanded upon. Herbert Freudenberger was an American psychologist famous for his research regarding burnout. While working at free clinics for substance abusers, Freudenberger (1989) developed the concept of burnout and defined it as prolonged exposure to job stress that causes mental, physical, and emotional strain. Maslach (1982), also well known for burnout research, elaborated on the definition to include three components that targeted emotional factors such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1982; Poghosyan et al., 2009). Emotional exhaustion refers to the chronic state of feeling emotionally worn out because of accumulated stress. Depersonalization in the workplace is the result of alienation and lack of individualization. Finally, personal accomplishment is the sense of competence, self-efficacy, and achievement. There is a clear distinction between work stress and burnout. Individuals who experience work stress are still able to cope with work stressors. Burnout, however, results in loss of motivation, mental and physical fatigue, and failure to meet work obligations. Burned out individuals can even feel their efforts are unappreciated and begin to withdraw from their colleagues.

Healthcare workers, in particular, report high levels of burnout. A study of nurses and healthcare technicians revealed the link between emotional exhaustion and burnout at high levels (Elshaer, 2018). Due to the extreme emotional situations that social workers encounter, they are also subject to burnout. Studies on social workers have uncovered that their chronic work stress leads to burnout (Collings & Murray, 1996; Lloyd et al., 2002).

Sources of burnout among healthcare providers can be traced to a variety of stressors such as workload which encompasses various tasks such as paperwork and documentation. The healthcare field requires copious amounts of documentation and paperwork which some research has identified as a stressor contributing to burnout (Elshaer, 2018). Understanding job stressors in the healthcare industry has helped better identify reasons for burnout in the field. In a study on healthcare professionals, Rupert and Morgan (2005) measured burnout in psychologists using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; 1981) and noted negative relationships between levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal sense of accomplishment (all components of burnout) regarding paperwork/documentation.

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In a 1997 study of work stress, Prosser et al. noted that paperwork can be categorized under work overload and was shown to contribute to the stress of mental healthcare workers. Psychologists ranked managed care paperwork, excessive paperwork, and excessive workload as their top sources of stress (Rupert & Baird, 2004). The data revealed these sources of stress in a survey given to participants in 1996 and then again in 2001. Excessive paperwork exists in the field, which compounds the stress that healthcare workers endure in an already stressful job profession. It has been shown that even healthcare workers' perceived stress can contribute to the feelings of burnout. In conclusion, research indicates that paperwork is a work stressor, which is a significant source of burnout in healthcare organizations.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Healthcare workers encounter a variety of work stressors daily, and research indicates that excessive paperwork is a culprit. Various theories link work stress and burnout; however, the framework selected for this project focuses on a core occupational stress theory: the job demand-control support model (DeJonge, 1997; Johnson & Hall, 1988; Karasek, 1979). This theory will be necessary to describe the existence of mental health stress in an occupational setting. The theory demonstrates how adverse aspects of job demands, job control, and job support relate to work stress.

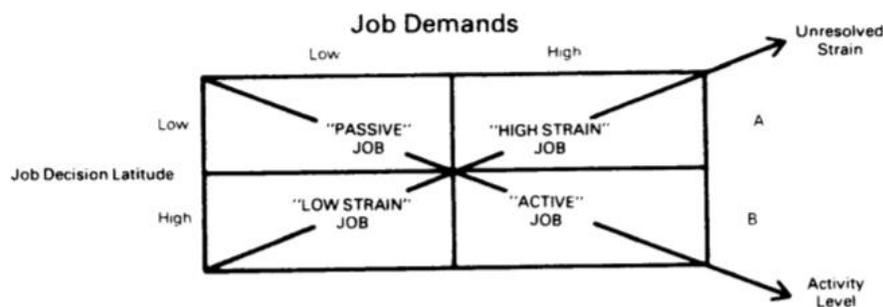
As jobs evolved over time, it became increasingly challenging for the worker to cope with the psychological components that strained their emotions. The work stress research of the 1960s and 1970s not only looked at job stressors, but also included research on theoretical explanations for the emotive aspects of it. Robert Karasek, a sociologist, focused much of his research on the concept of work stress and in 1979 conceptualized his framework of the job demand-control model (JD-C). This model explains that the demands of the job and the amount of autonomy (control) a person has is a function of job stress (DeJonge, 1997; Karasek, 1979). Job demands refer to such job stressors as workload, role conflict, and role ambiguity, among others. Control refers to the degree of ability a worker has to make decisions at the job.

The job demands-control model (Figure 1) depicts what happens when various levels of job demand and decisions are combined. Workers who have jobs with high demands and low decision-making control are subject to higher job strain (DeJonge, 1997; Kain, 2010; Karasek, 1979). For instance, healthcare workers such as nurses may have high patient care loads but no control of the decision to place those patients in their care. In contrast, if a worker has high job demands and high job control, they are more likely to be satisfied with their job (Kain, 2010; Karasek, 1979). Karasek called this an "active job" and one that provides workers the chance to hone their skills and ability level by learning new information.

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Figure 1

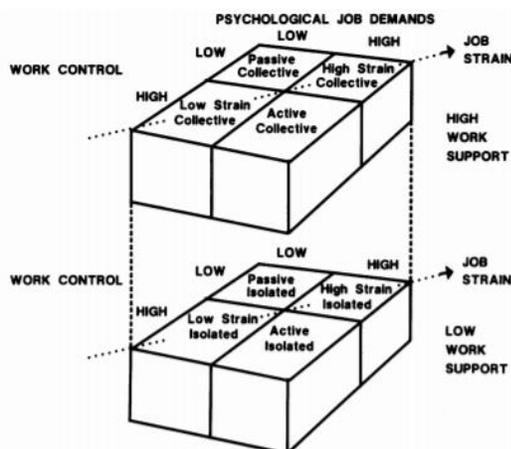
### *Job Demands-Control Model*



An extension to this model in 1988 by Johnson and Hall included the “support” component of work stress and wellbeing. In the job demands-control-support model (DCS), “support” refers to the on-the-job social support that comes from a worker’s supervisor(s) and colleagues. Johnson and Hall used the DCS model to support their theory that cardiovascular disease is more prevalent in workers who do not have support at their jobs and are also negatively affected by job strain. However, their study was in relation to physical health outcomes and not on work stress and psychological wellbeing. In 1990, Karasek and Theorell used the model to explain the extenuating factors of support at work and work stress (see Figure 2). The model illustrates that with high or low job demand, control, and support, an employee’s psychological wellbeing can be positively or negatively impacted.

Figure 2

### *Job Demands-Control-Support Model*



Research findings in the field of study concluded that workers could experience burnout when their workload is disproportionate, meaning that they endure high job demands, low job control, and minimal job support (Johnson & Hall, 1988). The three main stressors that have been associated with burnout (workload, role ambiguity, and role conflict) are interrelated with

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these concepts. Workload such as excessive paperwork relates to high job demand. Role ambiguity (for example, lack of clear job expectations) is an illustration of low job support because of the supervisor's absence of expectations. Role conflict aligns to low job control; for instance, when a worker is expected to perform a task that goes against their personal values, and they do not have the authority to deny performing the task, the worker can feel as if they lack control in their job.

Johnson and Hall's (1988) DCS model plays an important role in understanding what aspects of work cause employees to experience job strain. Based on the research findings of this project, Empower Cherokee's upper management will be able to use the recommendations to help guide them to promote better mental health outcomes for workers.

The research questions were designed to better understand the paperwork and burnout challenges at this organization. Table 3 shows how the research questions were categorized into two main concepts as well as the type of data collection method used to gather information on these questions. The first set of research questions seeks to understand the procedural practices and protocols regarding paperwork of the organization. The second set of research questions pursues the staff's perceptions and knowledge of paperwork as well as their initiative to request support when they need it. Finally, the third set of questions is structured around workload and burnout.

**Table 3**

Research Question Categories and Data Collection Method

Data Collection Method	Paperwork Questions	Burnout Questions
Staff interviews	What is the current structure of timely and accurate completion of documentation practices? <i>-How does staff organize documentation?</i>	
Staff interviews	What do administration/staff understand about documentation procedures? <i>-What is the staff's understanding of why they need to document certain things?</i> <i>-How do staff members ask for help?</i> <i>-What are the staff's initial impressions of documentation and paperwork?</i>	
Staff interviews Copenhagen Burnout Inventory		In what ways does paperwork contribute to burnout?

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		<i>-In what ways do the staff take breaks from paperwork completion?</i>
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### **Methodology**

Qualitative and quantitative methods were combined to establish a mixed method approach to the research. Combining these two methods is best suited to the study of documentation and burnout because this approach connects various modes of information gathering and sense making in order to uncover critical data (Patton, 2014). To understand perceptions and procedures of paperwork and documentation in the organization, in depth interviews were conducted and 11 questions were asked of the staff at Empower Cherokee (see Appendix A). One advantage of using this qualitative method is that the interviewer is face-to-face with the interviewees and can pick up on body language, which can be highly informative, especially for researchers wanting to understand perceptions. In this study, determining perceptions was key in unearthing feelings about documentation and paperwork. A disadvantage of interviewing is limited anonymity, which may cause interviewees to feel uncomfortable and not as forthcoming or truthful with their responses. The quantitative method used in this study was a survey. To measure the extent of burnout, surveys are an invaluable tool in describing the tendencies of a community (Cresswell & Creswell, 2017). Descriptive statistics were used to determine averages and variability of the survey items. This analysis helped to summarize the data to address the research questions.

### **Survey Data**

The Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) was used to survey the support staff at Empower Cherokee. The purpose of the CBI is to measure burnout in any professional setting. The CBI includes 19 questions that frame items in a positive and negative light covering three areas: personal, work, and client-related burnout. Maslach and Leiter (2016) defined personal burnout as continuous physical and emotional exhaustion; work-related burnout is defined as continuous physical and psychological fatigue in relation to an individual's job; and client-related burnout refers to continuous physical and psychological fatigue connected to working with clients. The survey included six personal burnout questions, seven work-related questions, and six client-related burnout questions.

The CBI is designed using a Likert-type scale, which included the response choices always, often, sometimes, and seldom. In addition, never/almost never, to a very high degree, to a high degree, somewhat, to a low degree, and to a very low degree were also response choices (see Appendix B). According to the National Academy of Medicine (2020), the measure was released in 2005 using Maslach's framework on burnout. The CBI was chosen for use in this study due to the measure's internal validity, reliability, and high response rates (Kristensen et al., 2005). In addition, the CBI includes the measurement of three scales of burnout. These scales were beneficial at predicting possible absences as well as if workers would stay on the job. Furthermore, the measure was readily available to the public at no cost.

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The survey was distributed to the 29 staff members at Empower Cherokee via email from the executive director on Tuesday, November 26, 2019. Respondents had until Saturday, December 14, 2019, to complete the survey, and they received regularly scheduled reminders during that time frame. A link to an online survey was presented on the Microsoft Forms program. Of the 29 surveys distributed to the staff, 25 surveys were collected, giving a response rate of 86.2%.

### **Interview Data**

Qualitative interviews were conducted with Empower Cherokee employees, and the research questions steered the development of the interview questions. The interview consisted of 11 questions that were focused on documentation and paperwork. The executive director was asked if interviews could be conducted during the workday. The executive director arranged and scheduled the interviews with support staff. The interviews were one-on-one in a designated private office space. Interviews were conducted all in one day on Tuesday, November 26, 2019, from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. on Empower Cherokee's main campus.

Among the support staff interviewed were seven Community Access Group staff, four Supported Employment staff, five Community Access Individual staff, two Case Management staff, and one Executive Director. These participants were chosen since they work with clients and provide the required daily documentation. No administrators were interviewed because their positions do not involve taking client data, and their jobs are more clerical in nature.

Most participants consented to the recording of the interviews. Four participants did not want to be recorded, so notes were taken on their responses. Practically all interviews lasted between five and 10 minutes, with the longest interview lasting 17 minutes. Notes from each interview were reviewed to understand and determine patterns in the responses, as well as to identify quotes that highlight important themes.

Inductive thematic analysis was used to develop codes and themes. After recording ideas found in the conceptual framework and highlighting themes, response patterns were identified. These patterns were recorded using Microsoft OneNote. With this information, the significant themes became clear. The patterns of responses are further clarified in the Findings portion of this paper.

### **Findings**

#### **1. Inconsistent Documentation Practices**

Two themes surfaced during support-staff interviews speaking to factors that identify the structure of documentation practices and organization. These themes included the tools that support staff use to organize documentation and what information is being documented. The types of tools used for documentation was a frequent topic of the support-staff interviews. These staff felt that they each had their own way of documenting what was required of them.

When asked, "How do you organize the paperwork that you must complete?", a majority of the support staff referenced how they were trained, and some did not mention any training at

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all. Participant 2 said, “Um, we all were trying to use sticky note pads on the computer which they just had that new system rolled over and they're trying to tell us that we can't really do that anymore. Ok. I want it [paperwork] to be individual for every person, but the way I was trained it used to be faster—which is closer to the five minutes.” Multiple references were made to the use of sticky notes on the computer to organize documentation. In addition to use of sticky notes, support staff also said that they use handwritten notes throughout the day to document.

It should be noted that several support staff mentioned that there was a discrepancy in the way that everyone records data. For example, Participant 15 said, “And then another problem here is that a person will tell you this is how you do it, and a couple of months later this is not the way you do it. It's so confusing because everyone tells you something different. Documentation is not the way it's supposed to be here. They should have training.” When and if support staff ask for help, they are not getting a consistent message. Since the support staff do things differently from each other, it can be confusing for someone when they do ask for help. If support staff is getting confused, then they likely may not ask for help again and will try to figure it out on their own.

### **2. Understanding of What to Document**

For many support staff, there was no question as to what was supposed to be documented. Most support staff mentioned goals, including what was offered to the client and what they did during the day. Participant 1 stated, “I usually take notes—like I do little handwritten notes, and at the end of the day, I make notes of what they did during the day if they met a goal, the kind of choices they made; X,Y, and Z. I like to say, ‘Well, what do you wanna do today?’ Not me directly tell them what they are going to do, so I like to try to leave that very open for them.” In addition to noting goals, health and safety were also mentioned as important information to be documented.

### **3. Understanding Why to Document**

The majority of support staff at Empower Cherokee reported that documentation is a mandate that comes from the state and government. They noted many reasons for why documentation is a necessary part of their job. Participant 4 stated, “The government wants to see the level of care to each individual.” Similarly, Participant 5 noted, “So, everybody else has an idea of what we're doing and how we're doing it. That we're not just sitting here on our phones, I guess. You know, it's important.”

Participant 12 stated, “Well it [documentation] tracks when we have them so that they know [or that whoever looks at it]. Or they [administrators] look back at where they were when they were out with us. Um, and it also states, ya know, that they were with us, they weren't here with a group or wherever. Um, it tells what they're doing out in the community, it tells what we're training them on or helping them with safety-wise and health-wise. What's important to them [administrators], ya know, with their [client] person-centered [approach] and what makes them [clients] excited. And what gets them [clients] going and gets them [clients] motivated and all that stuff.”

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In addition to noting these reasons, some support staff mentioned that they need to show that the organization is “person-centered.” In other words, clients at Empower Cherokee have a voice and choice of the activities they wish to participate in throughout their day.

### **4. Staff Do Not Ask for Help**

At Empower Cherokee, the support staff are tasked with completing the documentation; however, the data revealed that they do not ask for help. When asked, “How often to you ask for help when you get overwhelmed by completing paperwork/documentation?”, the majority of support staff indicated they do not ask for help. There were several reasons for this, one of which was that they did not want to burden someone else with their request for help. Others stated that they all help each other out at times and divide the documentation to be done among themselves.

Participant 7 stated, “You know, I have a great community connection team, but we also know that they're pretty limited on the time they can help you; so, you really try to do your own work as much as possible, but I do know that the team is there should I need them.”

### **5. Impact of Excessive Workload**

When asked, “How do you feel about the amount of paperwork you are required to do for this job?”, the majority of support staff answered that it was too much. Participant 2 said, “To me, it seems like a lot.” Participant 4 concurred, adding that it was “too much because we have 10 people: it's just a lot.” Similarly, Participant 8 stated, “I think it's too much,” and Participant 14 added, “Ah, it can be overwhelming at times.”

Support staff feel that there is too much in the way of paperwork, which can cause them to feel overwhelmed. One support staff member said, “Me on a personal level, I feel like I’m drowning it's just so much. I understand it is a necessary evil right, but it is so much all the time.”

Another aspect of too much documentation that came up was the fact that it takes away from spending time and getting to know the clients. Participant 7 said, “I feel like it's excessive and it takes us away from the roots of the program, which is actually connecting with the people we support.”

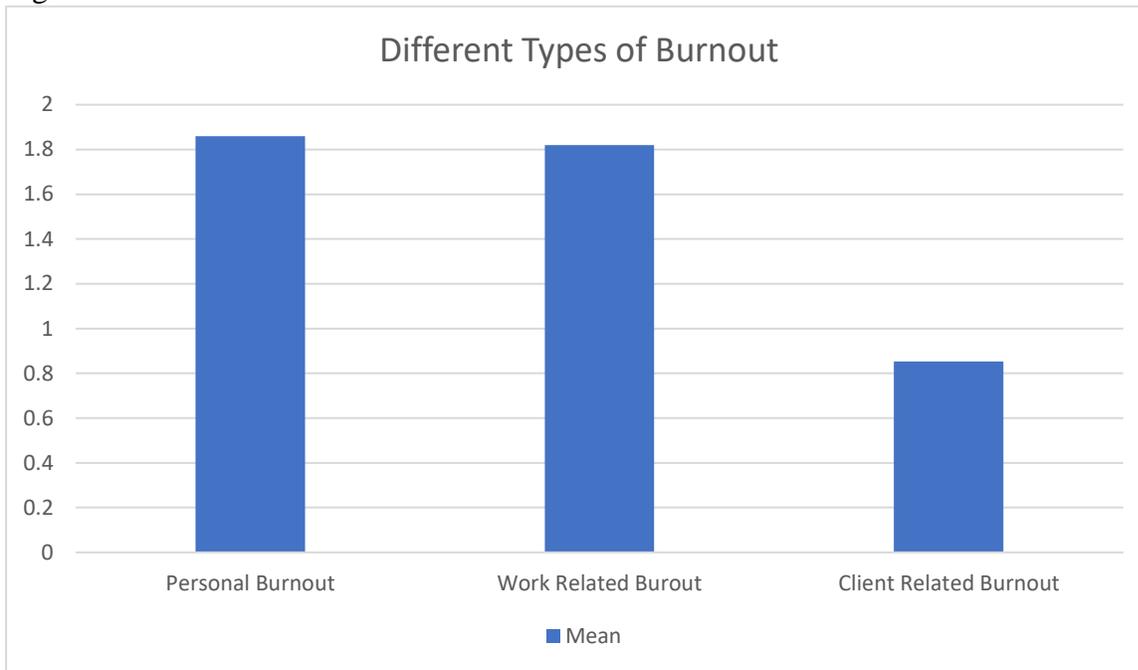
Participant 8 shared, “I used to be able to walk around on the floor and mingle with the individuals [clients]. And now I don't have time to do that. I'm stuck behind a desk doing all this paperwork and stuff. This to me is just too much. I think staff should have their hands on. I used to have [hands on] and I don't anymore. I don't get to spend that much time with the individuals [clients] like I used to.” Support staff truly care about their clients and miss that individual connection and interaction that they used to have more time for.

### **6. Burnout Experienced by Staff**

Using SPSS and descriptive statistics, I compared the means for all three burnout types: personal, work-related, and client-related. Personal burnout had the highest mean at 1.867, followed by work-related with a mean of 1.822, and finally client related burn out had a mean of .8533 (see Figure 3).

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Figure 3



I ran a repeated measures ANOVA and found a significant difference between the three different types of burnout,  $F(2,48) = 32.72, p < .001, \eta p^2 = .58$ . Pairwise comparisons indicated that there was no difference between personal and work-related burnout,  $p = .66$ , but personal and work-related burnout were rated significantly higher than client-related burnout,  $p < .001$  for both.

This information correlates with what the support staff said during the interviews—that they are stressed with too much paperwork. In addition, this supports my literature findings by supporting the theory that too much paperwork can cause stress and lead to burnout.

When asked, “How often do you take a break from completing paperwork?”, the majority of support staff stated that they do not take breaks and that they just go “straight through.” Some of the support staff noted the reason for this was that they are limited on the amount of time that they must get all of the documentation completed.

When responding to the sub-question, “In what ways do the staff take breaks from paperwork completion?”, Participant 12 said, “I do it all at the end of the day,” and Participant 13 said that they work “straight through.” Participant 7 noted, “...but typically no, I don’t really take a break.”

One positive note to mention is that client-related burnout was rated the lowest of the three constructs. From the data collected, the overall determination was that the support staff felt positive about working with clients. The findings and review of existing literature led to the following recommendations to address Empower Cherokee’s documentation and burnout challenges.

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### **Recommendations**

#### **Recommendation 1: Set and communicate clear expectations**

Often, employees neither know nor understand what is expected of them thus leading to role ambiguity, a well-known and widely researched stressor in work stress research. Employees can experience role ambiguity when they feel their job responsibilities are obscure and when they are held accountable for unclear responsibilities (Kahn et al., 1964; King, 1990; Rizzo, 1970). When reviewing the findings, it became clear that staff at Empower Cherokee were experiencing role ambiguity due to a lack of clear expectations of how to organize documentation. Support staff were using a variety of organizational practices that lacked cohesion. One mistake managers often make is assuming employees know and understand expectations. Making assumptions about communicated expectations can be a detriment to the manager and the organization (Lowry, 2016). Thus, managers need to consider the facts and base decisions on reliable information.

Organizations have many options for addressing role ambiguity. Not only is it imperative to communicate clear expectations to employees, but it is also just as crucial to maintain those clear expectations. To create this environment, managers can utilize performance feedback or morning meetings to reinforce expectations and goals for the day. Explaining why their expectations are vital is an important step for managers. Understanding the “why” behind management expectations gives employees a better understanding of the big picture and makes them feel like they are a critical part of the organization. Giving employees concrete examples as to why the expectations have been set clears up any misunderstandings or confusion for employees (Schooley, 2020). Managers must also break down the "why" in as much detail as possible to diminish uncertainty. In addition, managers can also help employees understand how the organization will benefit from these expectations in order to thrive and be successful.

The first step for Empower Cherokee management is to determine which tools to use to take notes to document required information. Then, management must express these expectations to the support staff. It is also essential that managers can identify when their behaviors lead to role ambiguity and work on modifying them (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983).

#### **Recommendation 2: Assign a mentor to support staff as a source of help**

Finding 2 highlighted that support staff do not ask for help when they need it. Although support staff understood why they needed to document certain information, the process of documentation still led to feelings of frustration. Many people can find it difficult to ask for help. In fact, asking for help can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and incompetence (Grant, 2018), so it is understandable why support staff are not inclined to ask for help. However, research shows that when someone asks for help, their feelings of being overwhelmed can be alleviated (Mehrenberg, 2013). As noted in the findings, staff may want to ask for help because they are experiencing role ambiguity and/or work overload.

One way that Empower Cherokee can assist their staff is to provide mentorship as a source of help. A mentor is one who supports a less experienced worker by developing a positive

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relationship with them (Staffileno et al., 2019). There have been numerous studies on the positive effects of mentors as a source of help for employees. How managers choose mentors is important and must be well thought out. Providing a mentor for workers can positively impact their job satisfaction and outcomes (Wilson & Elman, 1990). Management at Empower Cherokee should identify certain support staff who are good listeners and communicators. They should choose support staff who exemplify their expectations and follow best practices. By establishing a trusted relationship with the mentee, support staff will feel comfortable asking for help when needed.

One of the problems that an organization faces is that employees have a difficult time changing their mindsets. If support staff have done something for a long time, they may find it problematic to change those habits or unwanted behavior. A facilitated mentoring process in the organization (public, private, or non-profit) can create conditions for motivating changes in behavior (Murray, 2002). Facilitated mentoring is a system that guides behavior and evaluates results of mentees (Murray, 2002).

Providing a mentor leads to an increase in productivity for an organization. Understanding how to get things done makes the employee faster at the task, so more can be accomplished (Tyler, 1998). Mentors not only increase productivity, but they also promote teamwork. Building teamwork also fosters relationships and helps to retain employees. Employees feel much happier knowing that they have someone who they can confide in and trust at work.

### **Recommendations 3-7: Addressing Burnout**

Finding 6 uncovered that personal and work-related burnout were rated highest among the support staff at Empower Cherokee. In order to effectively deal with burnout, the organization needs to concentrate its efforts on climate as well as the individuals (Maslach, 2001). Many intervention approaches have been suggested with methods trying to treat burnout as it occurs while others try to focus on its prevention. Six domains have been identified as risk factors that lead to burnout: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Empower Cherokee must focus on these risk factors to curb burnout in the organization. Specific suggestions for doing so are addressed in the recommendations that follow.

#### **Recommendation 3: Assess workload expectations and reevaluate necessary paperwork/documentation demands**

When employees are faced with work overload, they are more susceptible to burnout by draining their ability to perform their job duties as required by the organization. This means it is more difficult to recuperate from a heavy workload (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). As noted in the CBI results, work-related burnout was rated second highest of the three types of burnout among the staff at Empower Cherokee, and excessive workload and lack of control are contributing stressors. In Finding 5, it was noted that staff felt that the amount of paperwork and documentation required of them was too much. When discussing types of documentation

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required, staff said that the documentation required of them was mandatory, which can lead to feelings of a lack of control over the amount of workload given.

Support staff that have a balanced and manageable workload are better suited to apply their skills and abilities for the good of the organization. Managers at Empower Cherokee need to assess what paperwork and documentation are already being used. If redundancy or overlap is occurring, managers must consider better ways to condense this information. They must determine what is required and necessary to comply with state, federal, and organizational regulations. In addition, Empower Cherokee managers must make sure employees are included in making organizational decisions. Managers at Empower Cherokee must consider ways to involve support staff in decision making and allow for their comments and concerns to be heard. This could be done at regular staff meetings or by sending out surveys.

### **Recommendation 4: Provide rewards and recognition to employees**

In Finding 6, the CBI revealed that employees felt burnt out because of their work. Question 8 stated, “Do you feel burnt out because of your work?” Respondents reported “to a high degree” or “somewhat” at a rate of 60%. Implementing rewards for staff can help to diminish these feelings of burnout. Rewards and recognition are meant to reinforce and shape employee behavior. Consistent rewards and recognition lead to a greater feeling of job satisfaction (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Employees can then handle a larger workload when recognized for their hard work (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Such incentives do not always have to be tangible (e.g., Employee of the Month); these rewards can be simple verbal recognition (e.g., shout-outs) or can be posted on the organization’s social media platforms.

### **Recommendation 5: Strengthen employee relationships**

Finding 4 uncovered that staff do not ask for help for a variety of reasons. In the interviews, staff indicated that they did not feel comfortable asking for help. This could be due to lack of a strong community of working relationships. Strengthening employee relationships and building community will boost job satisfaction among staff (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Community refers to the relationships between all staff members at Empower Cherokee. Employees are at a greater risk for burnout if work relationships include an absence of support and trust as well as unresolved conflict. Establishment of a strong community within an organization builds trust and greater social support for one another (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

To strengthen employee relationships, Empower Cherokee can focus on building trust with the staff. To build trust, the utmost compelling strategy is to make a personal connection, which might be as simple as having a conversation about interests or hobbies. In addition, being transparent, truthful, encouraging, taking blame, giving credit, not playing favorites, and showing competence are all proven strategies to build trust (DeSteno, 2015). Once addressed, this would directly manage the finding that staff are not inclined to ask for help and allow for the opportunity to shape the organizational community.

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### **Recommendation 6: Focus on fairness**

Fairness refers to decisions made at work and how they are perceived as fair and equitable by employees. It is imperative to demonstrate empathy to support staff to establish an environment of fairness in the workplace. During interviews, several staff commented that keeping track of documentation and paperwork for 10 clients was a lot for them to manage. Findings indicated that staff perceived their excessive workload as unfair and led to feeling stressed and burnout. Staff will use the quality of procedures and how they are treated during the decision-making process as an index for fairness (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

To ensure fairness within the organization, Empower Cherokee must work in collaboration with all staff, which would include giving them a voice in the decision-making process of the client to staff ratio and manageability of workload in relation to client care. The organization should consider interviewing staff to determine a fair and manageable client load. In addition, Empower Cherokee must keep in mind that hiring additional staff may be required to reduce the staff to client ratio.

### **Recommendation 7: Promote value**

Client interaction is deeply rooted in the values of Empower Cherokee. The findings showed that staff felt the excessive paperwork is taking time away from interacting with the clients. In addition, the CBI revealed that client-related burnout was rated the lowest of the three types of burnout measured indicating that staff do not feel stressed or burnt out when working with clients. This creates a values struggle and a gap between individual and organizational values, which causes staff to make a trade-off between the work they want to do and the work they must do, making them more susceptible burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). During interviews, several staff indicated the enjoyment that these interactions give them. Working to uphold these organizational values can give support staff guidance for their work and a sense of wellbeing, so they can make the right decisions, leading them to achieve the organization's vision and goals.

### **Limitations**

The support staff at the main campus of Empower Cherokee participated in the research process. However, there are two additional sites that belong to the organization where the support staff were not included. This was a request made from the Executive Director, which I agreed to before I began my research. Since all support staff were not included, my findings and recommendations are solely representative of the support staff on the main campus. These findings may be incomplete due to the non-participation of all support staff at the organization. The findings and recommendations may have been different given the outcomes of the responses from additional staff. These staff members may be experiencing an entirely different set of emotional needs because their job duties are different from those of the support staff at the main campus. In addition, there may also be a different set of concerns, needs, and perceptions from the support staff at the other two campuses. The findings of this current study may not be generalizable to the larger context.

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### **Conclusion**

Empower Cherokee is like many other healthcare organizations in that it faces the same challenges with excessive paperwork and burnout. The research in this study sought to understand this problem at the organization. The main discoveries included that staff at Empower Cherokee felt that there was in fact too much paperwork for them to do daily. In addition, the results from the CBI indicated that staff had significant levels of work-related and personal burnout. However, client-related burnout was rated low, indicating that staff enjoy working with the clients at Empower Cherokee.

Seven recommendations were made and, if followed, will give Empower Cherokee the opportunity to effectively manage excessive paperwork and burnout within the organization. The important work that this organization is doing is leading the community to ensure that it is inclusive of all people. It has given so many men and women opportunities to feel a part of their community and build important lifelong relationships. As Empower Cherokee continues on its journey, it is my hope that this work will impact decisions made and lead to positive outcomes for such an influential organization.

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### Appendix A

#### Interview Questions

- 1) What is your role?
- 2) How long have you been working at this job?
- 3) What was your understanding of documentation and paperwork procedures before you began your position?
- 4) What is your understanding of it now?
- 5) Why is it necessary for you to do the paperwork?
- 6) How do you feel about the amount of paperwork you are required to do for this job?
- 7) How often do you ask for help when you get overwhelmed by completing paperwork/documentation?
- 8) How often do you take a break from completing paperwork?
- 9) How do you organize the paperwork that you must complete?
- 10) On average how long does it take for you to fill out paperwork per week?
- 11) On average, how long does it take you to complete a draft of the Individual Support Plan?

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### Appendix B

Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (English version) used in the PUMA study

NB: The questions of the CBI are not being printed in the questionnaire in the same order as shown here. In fact, the questions are mixed with questions on other topics. This is recommended in order to avoid stereotyped response patterns.

#### **Part one: Personal burnout**

Definition: Personal burnout is a state of prolonged physical and psychological exhaustion.

##### Questions:

1. How often do you feel tired?
2. How often are you physically exhausted?
3. How often are you emotionally exhausted?
4. How often do you think: "I can't take it anymore"?
5. How often do you feel worn out?
6. How often do you feel weak and susceptible to illness?

Response categories: Always, Often, Sometimes, Seldom, Never/almost never.

Scoring: Always: 100. Often: 75. Sometimes: 50. Seldom: 25. Never/almost never: 0.

Total score on the scale is the average of the scores on the items.

If less than three questions have been answered, the respondent is classified as non-responder.

#### **Part two: Work-related burnout**

Definition: Work-related burnout is a state of prolonged physical and psychological exhaustion, which is perceived as related to the person's work.

##### Questions:

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1. Is your work emotionally exhausting?
2. Do you feel burnt out because of your work?
3. Does your work frustrate you?
4. Do you feel worn out at the end of the working day?
5. Are you exhausted in the morning at the thought of another day at work?
6. Do you feel that every working hour is tiring for you?
7. Do you have enough energy for family and friends during leisure time?

Response categories:

Three first questions: To a very high degree, To a high degree, Somewhat, To a low degree, To a very low degree.

Last four questions: Always, Often, Sometimes, Seldom, Never/almost never. Reversed score for last question.

Scoring as for the first scale. If less than four questions have been answered, the respondent is classified as non-responder.

### **Part three: Client-related burnout**

Definition: Client-related burnout is a state of prolonged physical and psychological exhaustion, which is perceived as related to the person's work with clients\*.

\*Clients, patients, social service recipients, elderly citizens, or inmates.

### **Questions:**

1. Do you find it hard to work with clients?
2. Do you find it frustrating to work with clients?
3. Does it drain your energy to work with clients?
4. Do you feel that you give more than you get back when you work with clients?
5. Are you tired of working with clients?
6. Do you sometimes wonder how long you will be able to continue working with clients?

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Response categories:

The four first questions: To a very high degree, To a high degree, Somewhat, To a low degree, To a very low degree.

The two last questions: Always, Often, Sometimes, Seldom, Never/almost never.

Scoring as for the first two scales. If less than three questions have been answered, the respondent is classified as non-responder.

\*Retrieved from <http://www.arbejdsmiljoforskning.dk/upload/CBI-scales.pdf>

On 10/31/