

Supporting CVI Workforce Wellness

Lessons from the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago's
Staff Wellness Initiative

February 2026

Why This Matters

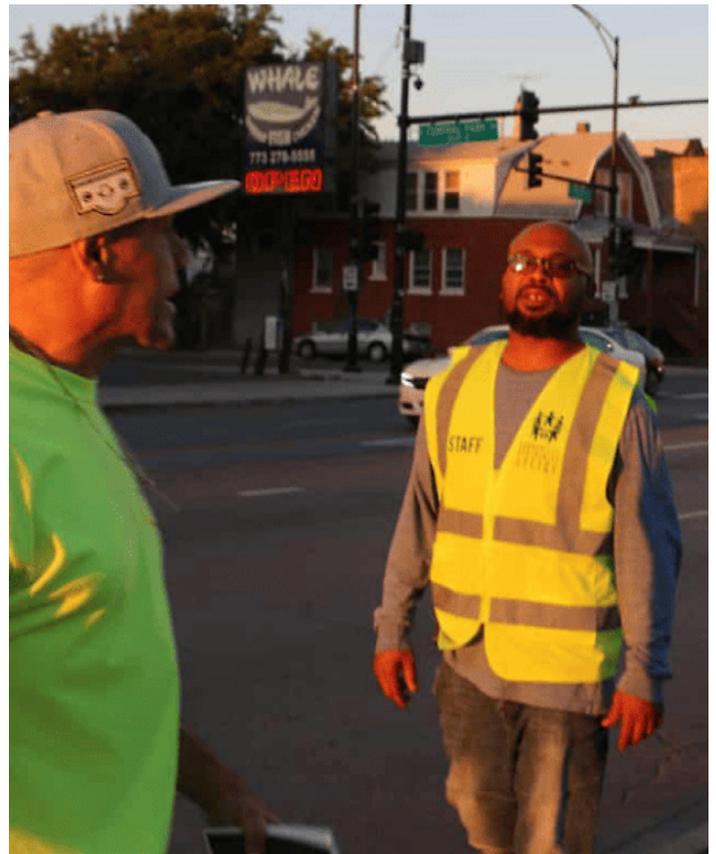
Community violence intervention (CVI) plays an essential role in Chicago's public safety ecosystem, yet the boots-on-the-ground work of building safer communities is risky and often traumatic. CVIs are proactive, hyperlocal strategies that address gun violence through community organizations that identify individuals most at risk for gun violence involvement and victimization and provide them tailored interventions.¹ CVI efforts rely heavily on the credibility of violence intervention workers who foster deep relationships with program participants, communities and groups at the center of conflicts to broker and maintain peace.

Supporting and addressing the health and wellbeing of the people doing the lifesaving work of CVI is essential for the long-term stability and effectiveness of the workforce. As the field grows CVI leaders are increasingly focusing on strategies to help support and sustain this critical workforce. The Institute for Nonviolence Chicago's (INVC) Staff Wellness Initiative offers one approach to prioritizing wellbeing and responding to support and infrastructure gaps in the CVI field.

This brief highlights lessons from the Center for Neighborhood Engaged Research and Science's (CORNERS) three-year process evaluation partnership with INVC's Staff Wellness Initiative.² The insights from this brief are intended to support CVI practitioners, leaders and other key stakeholders seeking practical, field-informed approaches to worker wellbeing.

The Reality of Trauma Exposure in CVI Work

The CVI model relies upon strategies, such as mediation and rapid incident response, that place outreach workers at high risk of trauma exposure. A landmark survey-based study found that Chicago's street outreach workers face startlingly high levels of violence exposure both on and off the clock.³ The study revealed that 20% of Chicago's outreach workers had been shot at while on a shift, and 59% had witnessed someone else being shot at. These findings demonstrate the extreme physical and psychological hazards associated with CVI work, which often compound staff's prior traumatic histories and increase their risk for secondary traumatic stress.⁴



Source: Metropolitan Peace Initiatives

Understanding how trauma impacts individuals and organizations is crucial to designing effective wellness interventions. Unlike many traditional first responders, street outreach workers often share lived experiences and residential proximity with CVI participants—exposing staff to violence before, during and after their shifts. Many SOWs also work additional non-outreach jobs to help navigate precarious financial conditions; and they consistently report trouble sleeping, feelings of tension, and other common stress symptoms.⁵ Over time, such exposure to chronic stress affects every system of the human body, contributing to conditions like musculoskeletal disorders, hypertension, heart attacks, immune disorders, and gastrointestinal challenges.⁶

On top of exacting physical and mental tolls on CVI workers, trauma can also distort perceptions of power and trust, undermining their sense of psychological safety.⁷ As CVI staff navigate internal organizational hierarchies, lack of trust stemming from trauma exposure can stifle the level of trust needed to implement wellness interventions. To sustain individual practitioners’ success and the broader CVI field’s growth, stakeholders must formally acknowledge the dangers and health risks associated with the work, implement proactive measures to mitigate these harms, and make long-term investments in worker wellbeing.

INVC’s Staff Wellness Initiative

[The Institute for Nonviolence Chicago \(INVC\)](#) is a major CVI organization serving participants on Chicago’s South and West Sides since 2016. INVC has directly addressed the wellbeing of its staff through its **Staff Wellness Initiative** (“the Initiative”). With funding from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois, INVC launched the Initiative in March 2022 to enhance wellbeing across *the entire organization*—from frontline street outreach workers to office administrators. The Initiative seeks to achieve organizational wellness, defined by INVC as “a way of operating that facilitates healing by fostering meaningful relationships with colleagues and participants, provides opportunities for post-traumatic growth, and produces mission-driven community change.”

Since 2022, the Center for Neighborhood Engaged Research and Science (CORNERS) at Northwestern University has partnered with INVC on a process evaluation of the Initiative’s initial phase. **The overarching goals of this process evaluation are to: document the early implementation of the Wellness Initiative, identify strengths and areas for improvement to inform subsequent wellness efforts, and help guide the implementation of future wellness interventions.**



Source: Institute for Nonviolence Chicago

Research Methods

Engaged Research Approach

The CORNERS team utilized an engaged approach—working closely with INVC at each phase of the research process. This engaged approach took shape through informal focus groups, co-developing research tools, and meeting regularly with INVC to ensure the study remained responsive to organizational context and needs. The research team conducted participant observations of regular Initiative-related meetings, events and activities at INVC. In addition, the research team completed qualitative interviews and focus groups with several stakeholders at the organization. This sustained commitment to engaged research ensured that the process evaluation and culminating case study were grounded in the lived experiences and expertise of the people closest to the work.

Early Implementation Phases

Fostering a culture that actively supports workplace wellness takes time. The INVC Staff Wellness Initiative evolved over multiple phases.

- Phase 1:** Wellness Committee members’ experiences highlighted the need for formative trauma education and members served as credible messengers for wellness.
- Phase 2:** Staff needs were assessed using a participatory process that was well received by those closest to the work.
- Phase 3:** Committee members and leadership navigated initial tensions and found unexpected alignment on organization wellness priorities.
- Phase 4:** The Implementation Subcommittee faced competing demands, challenges with the delegation of tasks and responsibilities, and ambiguity around their authority to implement changes.

Throughout this phased approach, it was critical to balance urgent and long-term needs among the staff. The figure to the right depicts a holistic overview of the full INVC wellness ecosystem that ultimately became the INVC Wellness Initiative.

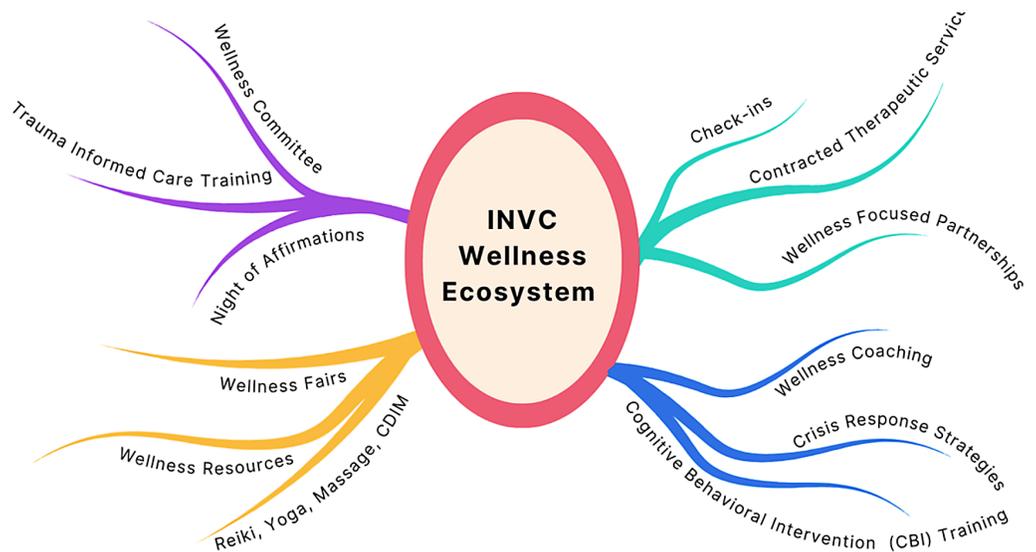


Figure 1: INVC Wellness Initiative Components

Promising Early Findings

During the interviews and focus groups, INVC staff identified several insights that may help inform the broader CVI field's efforts to support its workforce. The following section highlights how wellness activities may have influenced both individual and organizational wellbeing at INVC.

Visible Signs of Care Matter

Staff consistently noted that the Wellness Fairs—quarterly events that provide staff with a reprieve from the daily stress of CVI work to focus on their personal wellbeing—made them feel genuinely appreciated and cared for by the organization. These fairs provided accessible, in-person wellbeing activities (see Figure 1), while nurturing an environment that signaled to attendees the organization's commitment to staff wellness. One staff member recounted an incident wherein a routine health check prompted immediate referral for medical attention when a colleague's dangerously high blood pressure was observed. This example highlights the immediate benefits to staff health generated by establishing wellness spaces open to all. The Wellness Fairs were embraced by staff as a relatively low-stakes yet high-impact means to explore and assess one's own wellbeing.



Meeting staff “where they are” on their wellness journeys is an essential first step. Once that commitment is made, bringing wellness services into the workplace can normalize the utilization of such resources as integral to organizational culture.

Consistent Engagement Builds Trust

Staff with relatively high involvement in the Initiative reported feeling deeply supported by the Committee and BHW Team. In addition, participating staff said that they felt increasing levels of wellness support as the Initiative developed. This sort of “relentless engagement” in pursuit of staff wellbeing sends an ongoing signal that the Committee and BHW Team genuinely care for their colleagues.



The CVI field leverages relentless engagement with program participants to keep them safe from gun violence involvement. This same ethos can be applied to wellness activities to generate buy-in and communicate sincerity.

Skill-Building Resources Can Be Transformative

Cognitive Behavioral Intervention's (CBI) integration into training activities throughout the organization emerged as one of the most impactful aspects of INVC's wellness efforts. Staff members shared that implementing CBI practices has profoundly and positively influenced their personal and professional lives. Many highlighted how their training enabled them to address stress and better manage challenging interactions with colleagues at work.



Relevant, skill-building trainings have an immediate and beneficial impact on staff.



Source: Institute for Nonviolence Chicago

Safe Spaces are a Means of Healing in and of Themselves

Wellness Committee meetings helped foster peer-to-peer support, creating a safe space where members could regularly process trauma or aid one another through life's stressors. As one committee member described, "it feels like a safe place with folks that are like-minded, and we can just again wrestle with stuff that's hard to wrestle with." The Committee meetings were perceived by attendees as healing in and of themselves, regardless of the meeting agenda or structure—referred to "therapy without the therapy." Several staff said that the meetings were the first time they had encountered wellness resources in the workplace that felt genuine and intentional.



Staff highly value safe, recurring opportunities at the workplace to process stress and connect with colleagues.

A New Perspective on Wellness

Wellness Committee members observed a notable cultural shift at the organization that communicated an increased openness to wellness practices. One Committee member said, “recognizing the trauma in others has changed how I interact with others.” For some staff, Committee membership helped pave the way for broader acceptance and utilization of mental health care. Understanding that support can take various forms, committee members also reported feeling more open toward the concept of wellness as integral to their daily lives. One Committee member described, “I think that’s part of why we’ve been intentional about making opportunities that don’t feel invasive. It’s not just you sitting down and talking to a therapist. And so with that, I think it’s helped us get buy-in from folks who maybe now are more willing to engage with other wellness or behavioral health resources.”



Staff buy-in takes time, and organizations must commit to educating and engaging staff on ways to personalize workplace wellness.

Prioritizing Paid Time Off for Self-Care

Leadership played a role in reshaping organizational self-care practices by encouraging staff to use their paid time off (PTO). By reframing the concept of paid time off as self-care—sometimes even translating their earned paid time off into financial terms to underscore its value—Initiative leaders encouraged staff to truly disconnect from their work and rest. This approach aimed to dispel the notion that taking time off is counterproductive by signaling its mutual benefit to the organization and staff alike.



Organizational leadership can promote staff wellness by encouraging and modeling PTO utilization.

A New Way of Communicating

INVC leadership reported a noticeable openness and comfort among staff with regard to communication about wellness-related topics. Conversations around stress and mental health have become more frequent and candid throughout the organization, as noted by a Wellness Committee member who observed that “more people are talking about trauma.” Such developments signal a growing comfort with discussing vulnerabilities and confidence in a supportive organizational culture.



Cultural change around staff wellbeing can be measured informally as well, through shifts in staff language and interactions that epitomize the values most central to wellness initiative goals.

The aforementioned early findings suggest that the Wellness Initiative may have contributed to positive changes to individual wellbeing at INVC, particularly for Wellness Committee members and other staff more engaged with the Initiative. There are also early signs that the Initiative is beginning to make progress toward its goal of driving cultural change at the organizational level.

Practical Lessons for CVI Leaders

Based on the process evaluation findings, several lessons drawn may be useful for CVI leaders and organizations seeking to better understand, implement, and scale staff wellness efforts. This section highlights several important best practices that stakeholders, including policy leaders and funders, may wish to consider in their efforts to mitigate trauma and promote wellbeing among the CVI workforce.



Source: Institute for Nonviolence Chicago

Start with Trauma Education

Findings from this process evaluation underscore the necessity of providing basic education on trauma and wellness before launching a workplace wellness initiative. Without this foundation, staff may struggle or be reluctant to engage meaningfully with even well-designed interventions. By prioritizing trauma education, organizations can create more effective and impactful staff wellness programs that both improve workplace culture and empower individuals to promote their personal wellbeing and that of their colleagues.

Balance Immediate Relief with Long-Term Strategy

To effectively support worker wellbeing, CVI organizations should thoroughly assess staff needs with a dual focus. Organizations should take a balanced approach, identifying long-term needs for wellness interventions whilst addressing immediate organizational needs that could support worker wellness in the short term. Engaging staff in a participatory process promotes empowerment, shared responsibility, and collective buy-in, ultimately allowing organizations to develop responsive strategies grounded in the real experiences of their workforce.

Create Dedicated Space for Wellness

CVI organizations can support worker wellbeing by creating safe, non-clinical spaces where staff come together to focus on wellness, whether through a formal committee or a more informal structure. These spaces should be driven by trust-filled relationships, allowing staff to show up authentically and nonjudgmentally. Safe spaces dedicated to wellness can be healing, cost-effective, and easy to establish. A strong champion can help staff navigate implementation challenges, build trust and encourage meaningful engagement with such an effort.

Identify and Support Internal Champions

These findings highlight the importance of identifying respected leaders and trusted staff to serve as internal wellness champions. These individuals can help promote wellness supports to other key stakeholders, build or lead a committee to advance the work, or serve as a credible messenger modeling wellness within their organization. Champions can also take a lead role in ensuring that wellness activities resonate with the staff they are meant to support.

Operationalize Wellness, Not Just Self-Care

Wellness can look many ways—there is no one-size-fits-all approach. While mental health support for CVI workers is essential, individual self-care strategies are insufficient to address broader workplace conditions. Thus, as CVI organizations are developing worker wellness programs, it is important that they also tailor structural interventions like flexible/hybrid work arrangements, job and task modifications, and interpersonal communication trainings that support workers and build trust between different levels of the organizational hierarchy. Surveying staff's wellness needs is an efficient way to develop effective and responsive interventions.

Practical Lessons for Funders and Policymakers

As the field continues to evolve, practitioners should not be alone in the push for staff wellness. Sustaining CVI's impact and its workforce's health, wellbeing and longevity requires coordinated, structural investment. Such funding would allow for a level of financial stability that the CVI field has yet to enjoy. A well-funded CVI apparatus will support staff and leaders who feel recognized not just for their positive community impact, but also for their commitments to personal wellbeing.

Dedicated Investments in CVI Worker Wellness

Given the high rates of exposure to violence and traumatic stress among CVI workers, additional funding for their mental health support is essential. Further, CVI workers may benefit from similar wraparound supports that their participants receive including food access, housing support, and educational advancement. Sustained investments in CVI organizational infrastructure may also support staff wellbeing by relieving already high caseloads.

Supporting CVI Worker Wellness through Policy

CVI workers should receive a fair and appropriate level of salary, benefits, supports, and protections commensurate with the dire risk, elevated trauma exposure, and unique expertise that they bring to their roles and comparable to other first responder professions.⁸ Given the dangerous nature of the job, workers should have access to ample paid time off for bereavement, sick time, family leave, and other incidental circumstances. Including CVI workers in the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) under the non-exempt classification would be a critical step toward ensuring the profession receives such standardized workplace supports and protections.⁹

A Call to Action

As the CVI field expands, commitment to worker wellbeing must be a priority, not a peripheral afterthought. Such work can be arduous, but integrating staff wellness into the broader CVI infrastructure will both support individual practitioners and ensure the long-term stability of a field increasingly necessary for our collective public safety.



Source: Government Alliance for Safer Communities

References

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- 8 As a recent study published in *Science Advances* documented for Chicago, these workers are more than 10 times as likely as the police to be shot or shot at.
- 9 Supporting the Street Outreach Workforce for Safer Communities, Issue Brief, Center for Neighborhood Engaged Research and Science, October 2024.

The Center for Neighborhood Engaged Research & Science (CORNERS), housed at Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research, leverages the transformative power of networks to help community and civic partners build safer, healthier, more equitable neighborhoods.

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