

When Progress Depends on Us

What Would Real Relief Look Like?



An Experience

The meeting had gone better than expected.

For the first time in months, the young person was attending school more consistently. Housing had remained stable. Appointments were being kept. There had been no new crisis calls.

Representatives from several programs had joined the meeting. Each shared an update from their part of the work.

The progress was real.

Near the end of the meeting, someone thanked the care coordinator.

“You’ve really kept all of this moving,” they said.

Others agreed.

She smiled and thanked them.

She did not explain everything that “keeping it moving” had required.

The calls made when one agency believed another was responsible.

The time spent finding transportation after the original arrangement fell through.

The reminders sent the night before appointments.

The conversations with the young person when frustration made walking away feel easier than trying again.

The repeated explanations of requirements that did not always make sense together.

The small decisions made throughout the week to prevent one missed step from becoming another crisis.

None of those efforts appeared separately in the plan.

They were simply part of what she did.

After the meeting, she returned to her desk. Several messages were waiting. One provider needed information. A deadline had changed. Transportation for the following morning had not been confirmed. The young person had sent a message asking whether she had a few minutes to talk.

She began working through the list.

Later that afternoon, her supervisor stopped at her doorway.

"You look exhausted," the supervisor said.

She tried to dismiss it, but the concern was genuine.

Her supervisor reminded her that she had accumulated leave and encouraged her to take a day off.

"Turn off your phone," the supervisor said. "Give yourself a chance to rest."

It was not an unreasonable suggestion.

She knew she needed the break.

She also knew what would be waiting when she returned.

The unanswered messages. The arrangements that depended on follow-up. The pieces of the plan that worked because she remembered how they connected. The young person who had finally begun to trust that someone would answer.

She looked at her supervisor.

"I can take a day off," she said. "But a day off doesn't change what I'm carrying."

The supervisor did not respond immediately.

The care coordinator was not refusing rest.

She was not blaming the young person, her colleagues, or the organization.

She was trying to name something that had become difficult to explain.

Progress was happening. But too much of that progress seemed to depend on her remembering, coordinating, reassuring, repairing, and remaining available.

A day away might help her breathe.

It would not change what the work required when she returned.

She was not asking for permission to rest.

She was asking whether rest was the only relief the organization knew how to offer.

A break may offer respite. Relief comes when we are no longer expected to carry alone what was never ours to own alone.

Reflection

The supervisor's suggestion was sincere.

Time away matters. Rest matters. People cannot continue giving attention, judgment, patience, and care when they have nothing left to draw from.

But the care coordinator was trying to name the difference between rest and relief.

Rest might restore some of the energy the work had consumed.

It would not change the conditions consuming it.

When she returned, the same people would still depend on her memory. The same gaps would still require someone to bridge them. The same disconnected responsibilities would still come together at her desk.

Her exhaustion was not simply the result of caring too much or failing to establish appropriate boundaries.

It had grown from knowing that meaningful progress was happening—and believing that too much of it might fall apart if she stopped holding everything together.

That kind of responsibility can be difficult to set down.

Professionals may carry it home. They may think about the telephone call they did not return, the resource they could not find, the person whose progress has begun to slip, or the decision they would make differently if they had more authority, time, or options.

They may receive appreciation for going above and beyond while quietly wondering how long “above and beyond” can remain the ordinary expectation.

A system may recognize their exhaustion and encourage them to step away.

A day off can interrupt the burden. It does not redistribute it.

A Different Perspective

The question may not be whether professionals need more encouragement to care for themselves.

It may be whether the work has come to depend on individuals repeatedly compensating for what the larger structure cannot consistently hold.

A committed professional will often step into a gap because a person or family is standing on the other side of it.

They make the additional call. They stay a little later. They explain the situation one more time. They find a temporary solution because allowing the gap to remain visible may mean that someone goes without support.

In the moment, stepping in may be exactly what dignity and good judgment require.

The difficulty comes when an extraordinary response quietly becomes an ordinary expectation.

The system begins to function because certain people remember what no process holds, maintain relationships no agreement protects, and repair disconnections no single role has the authority to resolve.

Their effort can make the work appear more coordinated than it is.

Their commitment can make an unrealistic workload appear manageable.

Their success can conceal how vulnerable the progress may be if they become unavailable, change positions, or simply reach the limit of what they can carry.

This is not an argument for caring less.

It is an invitation to distinguish between caring deeply and carrying everything.

A system cannot call progress sustainable if sustaining it requires someone to be exceptional every day.

What Are We Actually Carrying?

Every role carries legitimate responsibility.

Direct-practice professionals carry responsibility for the quality and integrity of their work. Supervisors carry responsibility for supporting staff and translating organizational expectations. Leaders carry responsibility for stewardship, decisions, resources, and the conditions under which the work occurs.

Responsibility cannot—and should not—disappear.

But responsibility can expand quietly.

A professional begins by coordinating services and gradually becomes responsible for whether every service responds.

They begin by supporting a person's plan and gradually feel responsible for whether every part of the person's life holds together.

A supervisor begins by supporting staff and gradually becomes responsible for absorbing every pressure the organization cannot resolve.

A leader begins by holding accountability for outcomes and gradually feels responsible for producing certainty within conditions the organization does not control.

Across roles, people may find themselves carrying:

- What belongs to their position
- What another role was unable to complete
- What the organization has not yet found a way to hold
- What the larger system was never designed to coordinate
- What the person or family must eventually choose and own
- The emotional weight of believing that an outcome reflects how much they cared

When those different forms of responsibility remain unnamed, the most committed people often pick them up.

Not because anyone formally assigned the weight.

Because leaving it on the ground may have consequences for someone they serve.

The question is not simply, “How do we help staff manage more?”

It is:

What are people carrying because it genuinely belongs to their role—and what are they carrying because no other place has been created to hold it?

Recognizing the Rightful Owner

Not everything being carried by professionals belongs to another professional, team, or organization.

Some of it belongs to the person or family whose life is being discussed.

The person receiving services is not simply another participant in the plan.

They are the owner of the life the plan is meant to serve.

Professionals can bring knowledge, options, resources, relationships, and support. They can explain consequences, identify concerns, and remain present through difficult decisions.

But they cannot own the person’s reason for changing.

They cannot own the choices the person will eventually make.

They cannot own the action required when no professional is standing nearby.

When professionals begin carrying those things, they may work harder while the person has fewer opportunities to recognize and exercise their own ownership.

This can happen with the best intentions.

A professional reminds because the appointment matters. They persuade because the opportunity may disappear. They solve the problem because the consequences of waiting feel too great.

Each decision may make sense in the moment.

But over time, the professional may become the energy moving the plan forward.

Relief does not come from abruptly handing everything back and saying, “This is your responsibility now.”

That is not ownership. It is abandonment.

Ownership grows when the person understands what is happening, recognizes what matters to them, participates in the choices, and takes actions they increasingly experience as their own.

This requires a clearer understanding of what each party carries:

- The system owns the responsibilities attached to its authority.
- The organization owns the conditions under which services are provided.
- Professionals own the integrity and quality of their practice.
- Partners own the commitments they make to one another.
- The person or family owns the direction, decisions, and actions that shape their life.

The person or family is not an outcome to be produced. They are the owner of the life our work is intended to support—and our responsibility is to do our part so they can understand, shape, and carry forward what comes next.

We are responsible for what we provide, how we provide it, and whether the person has a genuine opportunity to participate in shaping it. We are not solely responsible for producing what another human being ultimately chooses or becomes.

Real relief becomes possible when professionals are no longer expected to carry the system’s gaps—and no longer believe they must carry the understanding, choices, and actions that rightfully belong to the person or family.

Respite and Relief

Respite creates necessary space.

It may be a day away, a protected lunch, a vacation, a quiet drive home, a conversation with someone who understands, or an evening when the telephone remains off.

Those moments matter.

But respite is temporary by design. It allows someone to step away from the weight.

Relief asks whether the weight can be carried differently.

Real relief may begin when a professional can say, "This cannot reasonably depend on me alone," without being viewed as unwilling, incapable, or insufficiently committed.

It may grow when a supervisor has somewhere to bring a recurring problem besides returning it to staff with encouragement to keep trying.

It may become possible when leaders can acknowledge that an outcome matters deeply while also being honest about what the organization can and cannot control.

Relief may look like:

- Responsibility that is clearly understood and genuinely shared
- Coverage that holds the work rather than merely collecting messages
- Space to identify recurring gaps without requiring one person to arrive with the solution
- Permission to name what cannot be accomplished within the available time, authority, or resources
- Decisions informed by what direct-practice staff are repeatedly being asked to absorb
- Support for the emotional weight of the work without treating emotion as a failure of professionalism
- A shared understanding that one person's commitment cannot substitute indefinitely for missing infrastructure

Real relief does not promise that the work will become easy.

It means people no longer have to carry preventable confusion, invisible responsibility, and systemic limitations as personal failure.

From Leadership to Direct Practice

Relief will look different depending on where someone sits.

For leaders, relief may come from being able to name competing responsibilities honestly rather than pretending every priority can remain equally urgent.

For managers and supervisors, it may mean having meaningful choices when staff identify that the work exceeds available capacity—not simply offering encouragement and returning the same expectations.

For direct-practice professionals, it may mean knowing what belongs to their role, where unresolved responsibility can go, and that asking for support will not be interpreted as a lack of dedication.

For administrative, fiscal, operations, and support staff, it may mean having the downstream effects of policies, timelines, and processes understood before they become another invisible gap for someone to bridge.

For people and families receiving services, relief may mean no longer depending on one extraordinary professional to make an entire system understandable—and having real opportunities to understand, shape, and carry forward what belongs to them.

None of these roles can create relief alone.

Leadership cannot redistribute what it cannot see.

Supervisors cannot support what they are not permitted to name.

Direct-practice staff cannot continue concealing gaps through personal effort and also expect the organization to understand the true conditions of the work.

And people receiving services should not have to experience the loss of one trusted professional as the loss of the only path that made the system work.

The work becomes more sustainable when the organization can see where progress depends on individual heroics—and become curious about what those heroics are holding together.

Your Organization's Reflection

Consider where progress currently depends on people doing more than their role formally requires:

- Which responsibilities are clearly assigned, and which are carried because someone knows they must be done?
- Where are individual relationships compensating for disconnected processes or programs?
- What work disappears from view because committed staff complete it quietly?
- When someone takes time away, does the work remain held—or merely wait for their return?
- What happens when staff say that something cannot reasonably be accomplished?

- Are recurring gaps treated as individual performance concerns or as information about the conditions surrounding the work?
- Where do supervisors take the problems they cannot resolve within their own authority?
- What pressures are leaders carrying that may also need to become visible?
- How does the organization distinguish accountability from personal ownership of every outcome?
- Where might professional support be substituting for understanding, choices, or actions the person or family needs an opportunity to own?
- How can professionals step back from misplaced ownership without withdrawing meaningful support?
- What would allow people across roles to ask for support before exhaustion becomes the evidence that support was needed?

These questions are not intended to identify who should be doing more.

They are intended to reveal where people may already be carrying too much—or carrying something that rightfully belongs somewhere else.

The goal is not to remove responsibility from the work.

It is to place responsibility where it can be understood, supported, shared when appropriate, and genuinely owned.

Continue the Conversation with LUV

When Progress Depends on Us invites organizations to consider what committed people are holding together—and whether rest has become the primary response to work that needs a different kind of support.

The accompanying Organizational Discussion Guide can help leaders, supervisors, direct-practice professionals, and cross-role teams explore:

- The difference between respite and relief
- Where extraordinary effort has become an ordinary expectation
- What belongs to individual roles, what requires shared responsibility, and what belongs to the person or family
- How invisible work and responsibility can become visible
- How to support ownership without withdrawing support
- What real relief might look like without asking people to care less

If this Perspective raises questions for your organization, LUV Solutions welcomes the opportunity to continue the conversation.

A complimentary conversation is not a presentation or a commitment to purchase anything. It is a place to consider what people are carrying, what the organization may already be doing well, and what real relief might require.

Professionals can support change without owning another person's life. People and families can own their direction without being left alone. Organizations and systems can remain accountable without pretending that every outcome rests on one worker.

Relief does not come from abandoning responsibility. It comes from understanding where responsibility lives—and ensuring that people have the support to carry what genuinely belongs to them.

Real relief begins when responsibility is no longer invisible, ownership is no longer misplaced, and support is not something we offer only after someone is exhausted.