



Becoming a Chaplain *Costs and Compensation*

June 2022

ChaplaincyInnovation.org



CHAPLAINCY
Innovation Lab

Becoming a Chaplain

Costs and Compensation

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This report begins describing the cost of training to become chaplain and the salaries and benefits chaplains receive in the United States. Anyone who considers themselves a chaplain in the United States was encouraged to complete this survey.² Questions asked included basic demographic information, whether the respondents were currently employed or volunteer as chaplains, what their training consisted of, and what their current salaries and benefits were. It is based on a survey conducted by the [Chaplaincy Innovation Lab](#) at Brandeis University in October 2021.

The survey was sent to approximately 10,000 people who receive the Lab's newsletter as well as to the Lab's [partners](#), including the [National Association for Catholic Chaplains](#), [Association of Professional Chaplains](#), [ACPE: The Standard for Spiritual Care and Education](#), and [Neshama: Association of Jewish Chaplains](#).

The data that follows was not gathered from a statistically random sample and readers should be cautious about drawing conclusions about its wider generalizability. Military and prison chaplains, for example, are under-represented in this sample.³ We hope this survey sparks more comprehensive overviews of the financial aspects of training and employment as a professional chaplain in the United States.

Who responded?

Approximately 1,300 people started the survey (n=1,258). This report is based on the 1,002 people who completed the survey. Table 1 describes the demographics of the sample. On average, respondents were 54.7 years old (*sd* = 12.6) with the youngest reported as 26 years and the oldest at 84 years. A majority identified as female (52.7%), white (69.5%), and located in the southern U.S. Census Region.⁴ Respondents primarily worked in a large city or a suburb near a large city.

Participants' religious affiliation was classified according to the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Survey (2015).⁵ The largest proportion of respondents identified as Evangelical Protestant (27.5%). Mainline Protestants were the next largest group (23.5%), followed by Catholics (10.7%) and Jews (8.7%). Just over 10% of respondents did not share their religious affiliation.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample, N=1,002

| Characteristic | | N (Percent) |
|-----------------------|---|-------------|
| Age | < 45 | 222 (22.2) |
| | 45 – 64 | 432 (43.1) |
| | 65 + | 235 (23.4) |
| | Not Reported | 113 (11.3) |
| Gender | Female | 528 (52.7) |
| | Male | 339 (33.8) |
| | Non-binary, Transgender, Other | 26 (2.6) |
| | Not reported | 109 (10.9) |
| Race & Ethnicity | American Indian / Alaska Native | 5 (0.5) |
| | Asian | 26 (2.6) |
| | Black or African American | 66 (6.6) |
| | Hispanic / Latinx | 21 (2.1) |
| | Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander | 42 (4.2) |
| | White | 696 (69.5) |
| | Multiple | 31 (3.1) |
| | Not Reported | 115 (11.5) |
| Census Region | Northeast | 173 (17.3) |
| | Midwest | 251 (25.0) |
| | South | 274 (27.3) |
| | West | 187 (18.7) |
| | Multiple Regions | 6 (0.6) |
| | Not Reported | 111 (11.1) |
| Urban Location | Large City, Suburb near a large city | 622 (62.1) |
| | Small City / Town, Rural Area | 223 (22.3) |
| | Multiple Locations | 50 (5.0) |
| | Not Reported | 107 (10.7) |
| Religious Affiliation | Mainline Protestant | 236 (23.5) |
| | Evangelical Protestant | 276 (27.5) |
| | Buddhist | 34 (3.4) |
| | Jewish | 87 (8.7) |
| | Muslim | 13 (1.3) |
| | Other Faiths | 49 (4.9) |
| | Catholic | 107 (10.7) |
| | Multiple Traditions | 62 (6.2) |
| | Historically Black Churches | 14 (1.4) |
| | Other Christian | 17 (1.7) |
| | Not Reported | 107 (10.7) |

Employment status and work history

We asked respondents if they worked for pay and/or volunteered as chaplains. A total of 781 chaplains (77.9%) reported having a paid chaplaincy position and 46 (4.6%) reported volunteering as a chaplain. A large group, 175 (17.5%), did not answer this question.

Of the 781 people being paid as chaplains, 76.6% worked full time and 21.9% worked part time. This is summarized in Table 2 as a percentage of the entire sample. In addition to their work as chaplains, 7.9% reported holding a paid leadership position in a congregation and 8.1% reported a paid position outside of chaplaincy (not shown as a table below).

Table 2. Chaplaincy positions by employment status, N=1,002

| Position Type | | N (Percent) |
|----------------|-----------|-------------|
| Paid Position | Full Time | 598 (59.7) |
| | Part Time | 171 (17.1) |
| | Other | 12 (1.2) |
| Not Paid | Volunteer | 46 (4.6) |
| Did not answer | | 175 (17.5) |

The sectors in which paid chaplains work are described in Table 3. The largest fraction (74.3%) worked in healthcare followed by multiple sectors (8.2%), education (4.5%), and community (3.5%). Healthcare includes chaplains working in adult acute care settings, pediatric acute care settings, hospice and palliative care settings, and senior/elderly living settings.

Education includes those working in both higher education and K-12 settings. The “Other” category includes chaplains working in the military, workplace, transportation, as a pet chaplain, as a doula, or as a social justice chaplain.

This sample does not accurately reflect the large proportion of chaplains working in the military and prisons. We also examined the fraction of chaplains in each sector that work in full-time versus in part-time or other paid positions and how many hours they worked as described in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 3. Chaplains in paid positions by sector, N=781

| Sector | N (Percent) |
|--------------------------|-------------|
| Healthcare | 580 (74.3) |
| Education | 35 (4.5) |
| Law Enforcement / Prison | 9 (1.1) |
| Community | 27 (3.5) |
| Crisis / Disaster | 15 (1.9) |
| Multiple | 64 (8.2) |
| Other | 49 (6.3) |
| Not Reported | 2 (0.3) |

Table 4. Types of paid positions by sector, N=781

| Sector | Full-Time Paid | Part-Time & Other Paid | Total |
|--------------------------|----------------|------------------------|-------------|
| | N (Percent) | N (Percent) | N (Percent) |
| Healthcare | 443 (76.4) | 137 (23.6) | 580 (100.0) |
| Education | 30 (85.7) | 5 (14.3) | 35 (100.0) |
| Law Enforcement / Prison | 9 (100.0) | | 9 (100.0) |
| Community | 15 (55.6) | 12 (44.4) | 27 (100.0) |
| Crisis / Disaster | 13 (86.7) | 2 (13.3) | 15 (100.0) |
| Multiple | 44 (68.7) | 20 (31.2) | 64 (100.0) |
| Other | 43 (87.8) | 6 (12.2) | 49 (100.0) |
| Not Reported | 1 (50.0) | 1 (50.0) | 2 (100.0) |

Most full-time chaplains reported working between 40 and 44 hours per week (62.4%, n=373; not shown as table) and the chaplains in part-time or other paid positions reported primarily working 20 – 24 hours per week (34.6%, n=63, not shown as table). The largest proportion of respondents holding paid positions reported working 40 – 44 hours per week (48.2%), as shown in Table 5:

Table 5. Hours worked by paid chaplains, N=781

| Hours worked per Week | N (Percent) |
|-----------------------|-------------|
| Less than 20 hours | 56 (7.2) |
| 20 – 29 hours | 88 (11.3) |
| 30 – 39 hours | 94 (12.0) |
| 40 – 44 hours | 377 (48.2) |
| 45 hours or more | 165 (21.1) |
| No Response | 1 (0.1) |

The survey did not provide information about respondents’ current job titles or job descriptions. However, we did collect information about work histories in chaplaincy. Among those who are currently paid as chaplains, a majority (75.9%) held a staff chaplain position at one point in their career. Just over one-quarter (28%) are or had been department directors/managers and close to 10% had been CPE Educators/Managers (Table 6).

Just over one-third (38%) of respondents who reported current paid chaplaincy positions moved for a job at one point in their careers. In response to open-ended questions, respondents said they moved as part of finding a paid position post-residency, due to changes in staffing at their current institution, or to shift from an unpaid or part-time position to a full-time and paid one.

Another set of respondents noted moving for better compensation (generally and in response to the cost of living), e.g., “There may have been positions available, but we could not afford to stay in Chicago with what we would have earned,” or for professional growth.

Table 6. Positions held, N=781

| Position | N (Percent) |
|---|-------------|
| Head of Chaplaincy Department / Spiritual Care Services Manager | 219 (28.0) |
| Staff Chaplain | 593 (75.9) |
| CPE Educator / CPE Manager | 76 (9.7) |
| Executive Level Spiritual Care Services Administrator | 21 (2.7) |
| Supervisor of Other Employees / Contractors | 95 (12.2) |

In addition to those working for pay, 237 respondents (30.3%) reported volunteering as a chaplain at one point in their careers. Of those 237, 97 (40.9%) reported currently volunteering. Volunteers do so in crisis/disaster settings, law enforcement, community, and other contexts. The majority (65%) reported volunteering for ten hours or less per week (results not shown as table). Some respondents reported combining paid and volunteer positions, with others only volunteering.

Education, training, and certification

Respondents reported preparing to work as chaplains in a range of ways. Some completed multiple degrees and programs of clinical training, while others completed short online courses. Some settings, like the military, federal prisons, and the Veterans Administration [require certain kinds of training](#). Healthcare organizations increasingly require some clinical training while other settings, like fire and police departments, tend to be more flexible about credentials when hiring chaplains. Among the 781 respondents who held paid chaplaincy positions, the majority (84.0%, n=656) had a master’s degree (Table 7). Among those with master’s degrees as their highest academic degree (results not shown in table), the largest proportion (55.3%, n=363) had completed a Master of Divinity (M.Div.), while 13.4% (n=88) had a master’s level degree with a religious studies or theological focus.

Fewer respondents reported a master’s degree in an arts field (1.8%, n=12); clinical psychology, social work, or another counseling field (6.7%, n=44); education (3.3%, n=22); or the humanities/social sciences (3.5%, n=23). About one quarter had more than one master’s degree (26.1%, n=171).⁶ A smaller number of paid chaplains (10.6%, n=83) had doctoral degrees (Table 7). Among those with doctoral degrees, about 77.1% (n = 64) reported a degree in theological or religious studies while 22.9% (n = 19) reported a non-theological doctoral degree (results not shown in table). The non-theological doctoral degrees came from clinical psychology, education, the humanities/social sciences, juris doctorates, or medical doctorates.

Table 7. Highest educational degrees of paid chaplains, N=781

| Degrees | N (Percent) |
|--------------|-------------|
| Bachelor’s | 24 (3.1) |
| Master's | 656 (84.0) |
| Doctoral | 83 (10.6) |
| Other | 12 (1.5) |
| Not reported | 6 (0.8) |
| Total | 781 (100.0) |

Of paid chaplains, most were ordained as clergy or otherwise credentialed as leaders in their religious traditions (Table 8). Slightly over a quarter of these ordained clergy described their religious affiliation

as Mainline Protestant (26.8%, n=209) and a similar proportion reported identifying as Evangelical Protestant (28.7%, n=224). Around 7% identified as Jewish and less than 5% reported being Buddhist, Muslim, Catholic, members of Historically Black Churches, or other. Christian respondents occasionally described changing denominations at some point in their professional lives. Others noted being ordained in multiple traditions or being ordained in one and endorsed for chaplaincy in another. Many respondents noted that the concept of ordination was not applicable to their faith traditions. In addition to training for degrees and ordination, at least half of the respondents also completed clinical training, mostly in a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program.⁷ Many were certified as chaplains through one or more organizations or processes.

Table 8. Ordination – if known & applicable – of chaplains in paid positions, N=781

| Ordaining Religious Tradition | N (Percent) |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Mainline Protestant | 209 (26.8) |
| Evangelical Protestant | 224 (28.7) |
| Buddhist | 22 (2.8) |
| Jewish | 57 (7.3) |
| Muslim | 2 (0.3) |
| Other Faiths | 30 (3.8) |
| Catholic | 27 (3.5) |
| Multiple Traditions | 16 (2.0) |
| Historically Black Churches | 14 (1.8) |
| Other Christian | 16 (2.0) |
| Not Reported | 164 (21.0) |

Over half (53%, n = 417) of chaplains currently in paid positions reported the level of incurred debt for undergraduate, graduate degrees, or to become credentialed as a member of the clergy in their tradition. The largest proportion of respondents reported acquiring between \$20,001 and \$50,000 of debt (n=139, 17.8%) (Table 9). Those who worked in healthcare, education, or multiple sectors mostly reported debt between the amounts of \$20,001 and \$50,000.

Table 9. Reported total debt by chaplains in paid positions across sectors, N = 781

| | < \$20,000 | \$20,001 – 50,000 | \$50,001 – 75,000 | > \$75, 000 | Not Reported¹ | Total |
|-----------------|----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| | N (Percent) | N (Percent) | N (Percent) | N (Percent) | N (Percent) | N (Percent) |
| Healthcare | 79 (13.6) | 110 (18.9) | 51 (8.8) | 74 (12.8) | 266 (45.9) | 580 (100.0) |
| Education | 6 (17.1) | 8 (22.8) | 2 (5.7) | 6 (17.1) | 13 (37.1) | 35 (100.0) |
| LE/Prison | 2 (22.2) | | | 1 (11.1) | 6 (66.7) | 9 (100.0) |
| Community | 4 (14.8) | 2 (7.4) | 1 (3.7) | 6 (22.2) | 14 (51.9) | 27 (100.0) |
| Crisis/Disaster | 1 (6.7) | 2 (13.3) | 2 (13.3) | 3 (20.0) | 7 (46.7) | 15 (100.0) |
| Multiple | 6 (9.4) | 10 (15.6) | 3 (4.7) | 8 (12.5) | 37 (57.8) | 64 (100.0) |
| Other | 8 (16.3) | 6 (12.3) | 4 (8.2) | 11 (22.4) | 20 (40.8) | 49 (100.0) |
| Not Reported | | 1 (50.0) | | | 1 (50.0) | 2 (100.0) |
| Total | 106 (13.6) | 139 (17.8) | 63 (8.0) | 109 (14.0) | 364 (46.6) | 781 (100.0) |

¹Those who did not report their debt did not necessarily have no debt. The ability to specify none was not present.

Respondents were asked whether they received a salary, were paid hourly, or were compensated in other ways. About two-thirds (67%, n=524) of paid respondents reported receiving a salary while 28.3% reported being paid hourly. The largest proportion of respondents reported an annual income between \$50,001 and \$60,000 (18.4%, n=144), followed closely by the group earning \$25,001 to \$50,000 (17.7%, n=138) (Table 10). Income varied by sector.

The largest proportion of chaplains working in healthcare and education reported being paid between \$50,001 to \$80,000 per year (Table 11). Sample sizes were too small for additional analyses.

Table 10. Income ranges for paid chaplains, N=781

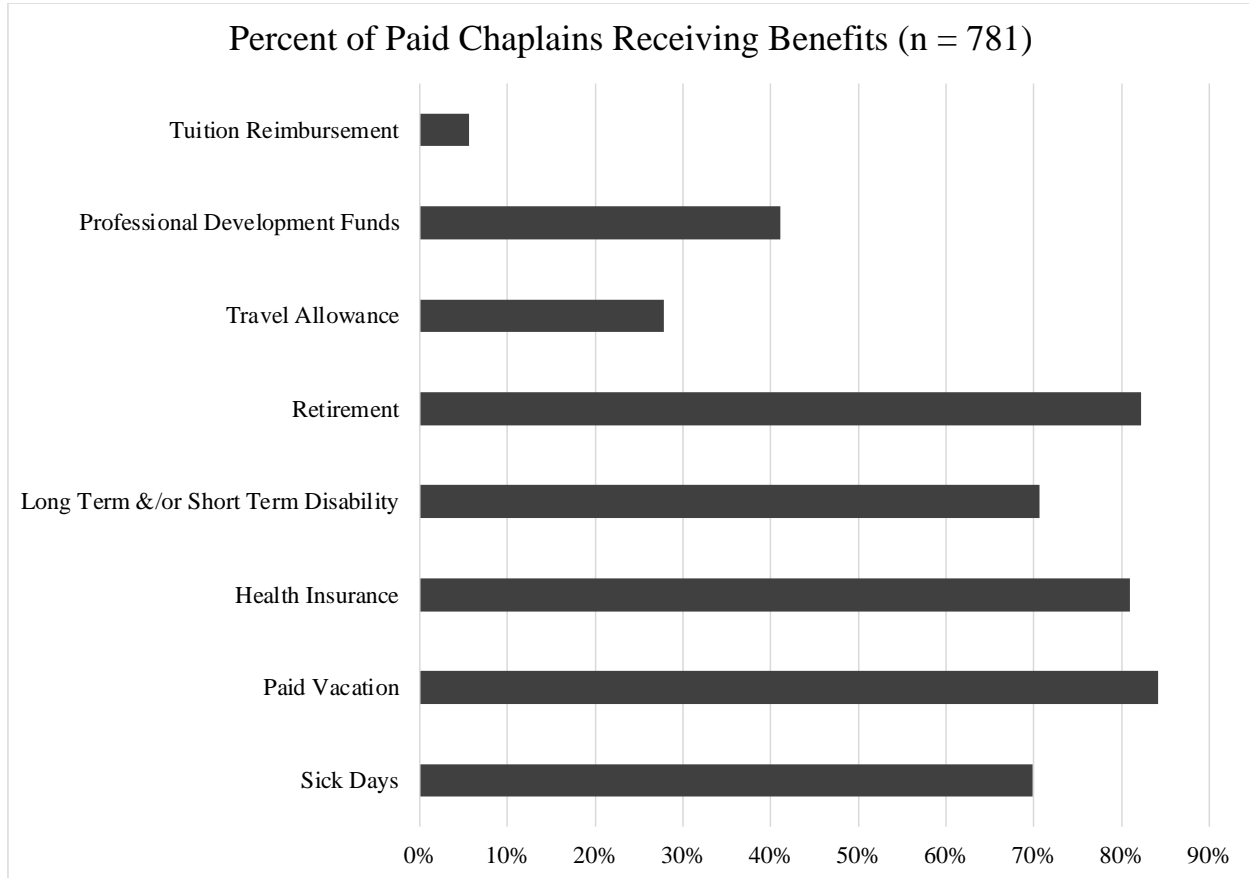
| Annual Income | N (%) |
|--------------------------------|--------------|
| Less than or equal to \$25,000 | 75 (9.6) |
| \$25,001 - \$50,000 | 138 (17.7) |
| \$50,001 - \$60,000 | 144 (18.4) |
| \$60,001 - \$70,000 | 111(14.2) |
| \$70,001 - \$80,000 | 103 (13.2) |
| \$80,001 - \$90,000 | 50 (6.4) |
| \$90,001 - \$100,000 | 42 (5.4) |
| Greater than \$100,000 | 63 (8.1) |
| Not Reported | 55 (8.1) |
| Total | 781 (100.0) |

Table 11. Income by sector for paid chaplains, N=781

| | < \$50,000 N (Percent) | \$50,001 – 80,000 N (Percent) | > \$80,000 N (Percent) | Not Reported¹ N (Percent) | Total N (Percent) |
|-----------------|--|--|--|---|------------------------------------|
| Healthcare | 168 (29.0) | 268 (46.2) | 107 (18.4) | 37 (6.4) | 580 (100.0) |
| Education | 8 (22.9) | 14 (40.0) | 10 (28.6) | 3 (8.6) | 35 (100.0) |
| LE/Prison | | 6 (66.7) | 1 (11.1) | 2 (22.2) | 9 (100.0) |
| Community | 9 (33.3) | 13 (48.1) | 3 (11.1) | 2 (7.4) | 27 (100.0) |
| Crisis/Disaster | 3 (20.0) | 7 (46.7) | 4 (26.7) | 1 (6.7) | 15 (100.0) |
| Multiple | 19 (29.7) | 25 (39.1) | 14 (21.9) | 6 (9.4) | 64 (100.0) |
| Other | 6 (12.2) | 24 (49.0) | 16 (32.6) | 3 (6.1) | 49 (100.0) |
| Not Reported | | 1 (50.0) | | 1 (50.0) | 2 (100.0) |
| Total | 213 (27.3) | 358 (45.8) | 155 (19.8) | 55 (7.0) | 781 (100.0) |

Most respondents in paid positions receiving sick days (69.8%, n=545) and paid vacation (84.2%, n=658). More than half also reported receiving retirement, long-term and/or short-term disability, health insurance, paid vacation, and sick days as described in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Percent of paid chaplains receiving benefits



Advice for people entering chaplaincy

Respondents were asked to share advice for those in training for chaplaincy as well as additional thoughts about training and compensation. They offered almost a thousand comments. The vast majority reported their love for their profession. Many stressed that chaplaincy is a calling: “Chaplaincy work is a beautiful calling” and “do what you are called by God to do,” wrote two respondents. Chaplains feel that those who can answer the call are deeply needed: “There is a world of hurt out there that needs YOU and all your gifts you bring with you... Chances are, you will absolutely love chaplaincy as many of us do.”

Another commented “Know that you are meeting great needs now more than ever.” Many comments also described the emotional richness and rewards of chaplaincy: “I love my work, the awe of it all;” “Enjoy the sacred moments and experiences that this work provides – there’s both beauty and terror in it, and it is all sacred.”

Those offering comments advised prospective chaplains to think about the proper credentials for their desired work at the beginning of their educational process. As one respondent reported, “I’m frequently frustrated by the feeling that I’m very well-trained but very poorly-credentialed for most jobs related to my work.” Another respondent warned, “You may receive excellent training... However, an M.Div. and CPE won’t provide you with the requirements [for] any type of license.” Respondents also encouraged

members of some religious groups to begin the sponsoring or endorsement process with their national organization before undertaking training and residency due to delays that may occur during those processes. Equally important to understanding one's own tradition, however, is knowing "what employers are looking for as qualifications."

Financial concerns loomed large in the open-ended responses. One chaplain, who reported satisfaction with their own (negotiated) salary, observed, "I know this may not apply to all chaplaincy positions, but I have seen so many chaplains accept a lower salary than they could have received had they negotiated, then become resentful that they are overworked and underpaid."

Other respondents recommended thinking ahead to "supplement your income" and "diversify your skill set," or "be bi-vocational." One commenter concluded bluntly, "Do it as a retirement career. You can't afford to do this if you're supporting a family," and another agreed: "It's a rewarding experience, but financially untenable for many." The amount of debt incurred during training is a major factor in whether chaplaincy pays a living wage: "Salaries are often not sufficient to recoup the cost of substantial student debt."

Some respondents provided tips about job searching also applicable to other fields, reminding chaplains in training that although it is a spiritual vocation there are still mundane hiring processes to navigate. Advice included "Always negotiate your salary!" and "Ask lots of questions before accepting a job – what is the case load? What does organizational support look like? Are there continuing ed benefits?" Like other careers, it is important to "check out job opportunities when you enter training [and] network in the field." Remember, too, "Not all employers are alike!"

Overwhelmingly, respondents recommended CPE residency programs for both practical and financial reasons. One respondent recommended these programs because "they will provide breadth & depth in regard to patient care over a diversity of populations, excellent supervision, increased competencies over a variety of circumstances, and depth in growth vocationally & personally."

Another respondent agreed: "Get a CPE residency and dedicate yourself to nothing else but this learning process. The time invested will change your life." Even second residencies were suggested by a small but vocal minority of respondents: "Consider doing an extra residency at a different type of facility," and, "Find out where your calling lies and then do a paid residency to get your 4 units[...] then do a specialized, paid 2nd year residency so you can be a generalist and a specialist."

Many also offered advice about the personal work that must be done to prepare for a career in chaplaincy. One respondent noted that "the most important 'training' would be personal therapeutic self-work [sic] in tandem with pastoral formation." Another respondent's most important suggestion: "Do the inward work so you can do the outward work." Therapists, spiritual directors, and mentors were all recommended.

The final major theme running throughout much of the advice emphasized patience, or even endurance, about the process of training for chaplaincy: "Be patient – it took me 4 years to get into a residency program." "Be patient and perseverant. It took me 7 years from when the seed was planted until my training bore fruit." "Remember that it is not a race, and that everyone comes in with different

skill levels and experience.” “It’s longer and more rigorous than I had imagined.” “It’s a long haul but it is worth it.” “Pace yourself.”

Conclusions

This survey grew out of questions asked by participants in the [Field Guide for Aspiring Chaplains](#) webinar series offered by the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab. Presenters in that series often describe the processes and experiences of becoming a chaplain. There is limited systematic data about the financial costs and benefits as well as the time and opportunity costs involved in the process. We hope the information offered here will help current and prospective chaplains evaluate the training and financial costs of working as a chaplain to make the most informed decisions.

We concur with chaplains who encourage those considering the field to look carefully at the financial costs of theological education, clinical training, residencies, certification and professional membership costs and salaries and benefits in the jobs available. While not evident in this survey, chaplains in the federal government – the military, federal prisons, and the Veterans Administration – often make more money and have better benefits than those working for non-profit organizations. There also seem to be more positions in prisons today than in healthcare, though fewer chaplains seek out prison work.

We support future training and certification models that will make it easier for chaplains to be employed by different sectors at different times in their careers. Greater standardization in chaplaincy training will lead to more versatility over the professional life course in response to shifting demand for chaplaincy and spiritual care the Lab is working to understand in [other projects](#).

¹ Kelsey White, Jennifer Cañas Alegria, Amy Lawton, Michael Skaggs, Wendy Cadge and Shirah Hecht contributed to this survey, analysis and reporting for the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab at Brandeis University.

² This survey was approved by the [Institutional Review Board](#) at Brandeis University.

³ As of January 2021, there were approximately 4,310 military chaplains working in the U.S. military. Most military chaplains work in the Army (N=1,510) or Navy (N=875). In July 2021, the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) released an audit of its Chaplaincy Services Program. According to the report, as of March 2020, there were 263 chaplains and 64 assistants dispersed among the BOP’s 122 institutions “Audit of the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ Management and Oversight of Its Chaplaincy Services Program,” July 2021. The most recent national data about chaplains working in state correctional facilities is a 50-state survey by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life released in 2012. “Religion in Prisons - A 50-State Survey of Prison Chaplains,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, 2012, <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/03/22/prison-chaplains-exec/>.

⁴ The United States Census Bureau splits the country into four regions and nine divisions. Each region (Midwest, Northeast, South and West) includes two to three divisions. These divisions occurred first within census publications (U.S. Census Bureau, N.K.D). United States Census Bureau. (N.K.D). “History: Regions and Divisions.” Accessed 8 March 2022. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/history/www/programs/geography/regions_and_divisions.html

⁵ Participants’ religious affiliation was classified according to the Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape Survey (2015). America’s Changing Religious Landscape. Accessed March 2022. Retrieved from

⁶ The highest educational attainment for the group of chaplains in paid positions currently did not differ from the whole sample.

⁷ Survey constraints did not allow us to accurately capture more detailed information



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