

Cornerstone for Resilient Communities and a Revitalized Economy: The Role of Human Services in Building Well-Being from the Ground Up

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At APHSA, we want every human being to be safe and healthy with the opportunity to live a happy, vibrant life. We are committed to public service and advancing the common good. We work in concert with policymakers, practitioners, and communities to advance our shared vision for *thriving communities built on human potential*. We represent the cabinet-level leadership of state and local health and human services agencies and the subject matter experts that help execute their mission to improve outcomes for people nationwide. Our members are experts in administering, overseeing and aligning services that build resilience and bolster family well-being through access to food, health care, employment, child care, and other key building blocks.

Learn more about [Who We Are](#)



Why Human Services Matter

To become a nation where all Americans can thrive, together we must build resilient communities and a revitalized economy. We know our own well-being is inextricably linked to the health of the communities where we grow-up, go to school, gain skills for life, work, raise kids, and retire. When we focus on building well-being for everyone across the lifespan, we strengthen our nation as a whole.

Human services are the essential bricks and mortar that undergird what allows all of us an equitable opportunity to live our fullest lives. Human services help shape and support us at key points in our lives, opening opportunities for lifelong success. Human services provide foundational supports to families facing adversity and ensure resilience at familial and community levels that help us weather life's inevitable ups and downs. They are a stabilizing force when we are hit by an unexpectedly severe storm such as the COVID-19 pandemic we are all experiencing.

Human services are **the cornerstone of building well-being** by providing access to quality child care, education, and health care; assuring food and housing security; promoting opportunities to earn family-sustaining wages and accumulate savings; connecting people to support systems that reduce stress and more. *With these building blocks, all families can thrive.*

Human services are also an economic boost to our communities during periods of widespread duress. They are the building blocks of a strong, inclusive economy for all Americans – across urban, rural and suburban communities, and from one generation to the next. Put another way, human services are an integral part of our critical infrastructure and foundational to building community resiliency and a revitalized economy.

And, when we invest wisely in human services using whole family approaches¹ and before significant problems can arise, the impact is both an immediate return on investment and a down payment for

1 Whole family approaches involve working simultaneously with children and adults in a family, recognizing that services are most impactful when considering the assets and needs of the family together. GAO Report, Poverty Reduction: HHS Can Improve Information to Assist States and Localities in Adopting Approaches that Serve Whole Family Approaches, May 2020. <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-20-382>



our children's future. For example the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is one of the most effective per dollar federal investments to boost local employment, as SNAP benefits are promptly spent at local stores that in turn retain and hire additional workers, with studies showing that each dollar invested in SNAP results in a 150% return to GDP.² For every \$1 spent on family strengthening and supportive services, \$20 or more can be saved in saved future costs that would otherwise be incurred in foster care, mental health, incarceration, academic challenges, and lost opportunities for employment and associated tax revenue.³ And, a recent study from McKinsey & Co. showed that if we closed the racial wealth gap we could grow US gross domestic product by between \$1 trillion to \$1.5 trillion by 2028.⁴

Over the past decade, we have gained incredible insights from brain science, cross agency partnerships, innovative funding strategies, and shared learning across the human services field. And, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that the various systems that human services play an integral role in – health, economic supports, education, workforce, child well-being – **can adapt and flex** in the ways we need them to do so. Each of these systems moved swiftly to virtual service delivery, ensuring families have access to the supports needed through the public health emergency in the safest way possible, while also evaluating potential benefits in reducing unnecessary burdens on people to travel and take time away from work. And when existing systems are not in place to address unmet needs, human services step in to meet the challenge. SNAP, a key countercyclical tool to combat rising food insecurity, worked with education partners to rapidly innovate and deliver Pandemic EBT⁵ benefits to families when children were no longer able to access free and reduced-price meals during school closures. We must draw on these lessons and keep our line of sight on what is needed to bounce forward.



We also stand ready to confront the role our own systems have played in limiting human potential and producing disparate outcomes across race and place. As further illuminated by the COVID-19 pandemic, stark health disparities are deeply intertwined with wealth and income inequality, housing discrimination, and lack of access to child care, education, banking, transportation and modern essentials like broadband. Our path forward is rooted in understanding how our people-serving systems have far too often enabled and exacerbated structural inequities that trace race and income lines causing harms that have cumulatively built on each other. In laying the necessary tracks for an equitable and inclusive economic mobility, we must apply a [race equity lens](#) and consider the whole needs of families.

2 UDSA Economic Research Service, SNAP Redemptions Contributed to Employment During the Great Recession, May 28, 2019 <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2019/may/snap-redemptions-contributed-to-employment-during-the-great-recession>

3 Transforming Child Welfare Systems, Casey Family Programs. June 2019. https://caseyfamilypro-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/media/TS_Research-return-on-investment-maltreatment-prevention.pdf

4 McKinsey & Co., The Economic Impact of Closing the Racial Wealth Gap, August 2019. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/the-economic-impact-of-closing-the-racial-wealth-gap#>

5 Authorized through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act in March 2020, the Pandemic EBT program directed SNAP agencies to issue nutrition benefits through Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards for students eligible for free and reduced-price meals during school closures. The program has since been reauthorized through FY 2021 and extended to include students in schools with reduced hours or attendance and children missing free and reduced-price meals in child care settings.



How Federal Policymakers Can Help Build Thriving Communities

At APHSA, we are committed to working together to ensure that the human services system works in service of people, and not the other way around. With a resolute focus on equity and building on the assets of families and communities, the many advancements in the field, and our long-standing experience administering these services on the ground, we can advance a recalibrated human services system that positions all Americans to be healthy and well.

COVID-19 Response: Ensuring Everyone Can Weather the Storm

The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated just how inter-connected the foundational building blocks to well-being are. In order to drive a strong and equitable recovery through employment opportunities, parents must have access to safe and affordable child care and schools. In order to disentangle the root causes of health disparities, we must tackle the social and environmental conditions that drive them. In order to close wealth gaps, we must understand the historical policies that have created them.



And, how we respond as a nation now directly impacts our long-term outlook. Inaction on the growing disparities the pandemic has magnified will reinforce structural inequities for years to come. But by taking swift action to mitigate the ongoing health and economic crises faced within communities today, especially by communities of color and families experiencing generational poverty, we can emerge stronger. The solutions that are needed are at our fingertips if we commit to taking these actions:

» REINFORCE THE FOUNDATION ON WHICH HUMAN SERVICES AGENCIES SIT.

At a time when state and local resources are severely constrained (with projected budget shortfalls of \$450 to \$650 billion through FY 2022, depending on the severity and duration of the economic downturn⁶) and demand for services has grown exponentially, we must ensure that human services agencies can continue to deliver on their critical mission.

What Federal Policymakers Can Do:

- Support continuity of the service array that must undergird an effective human services system, including by providing enhanced Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) match through the time it takes for a full economic recovery and providing other flexibilities that support state fiscal relief
- Extend waiver flexibilities that preserve access to critical economic supports and child well-being services for the duration of the public health emergency
- Capture and make use of evidence on innovations and policy shifts in human services delivery in response to the pandemic that increase accessibility, eliminate administrative roadblocks, and invest in the system capacity to better respond to community needs in the future
- Make explicit in federal guidance that state and local human services staff are essential workers in response to emergencies and disasters

6 U.S. State and Local Government Shortfall Update. Moody's Analytics. September 21, 2020. https://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/fiscal/Moody%27s_09.21.20_Shortfall-Update.pdf

» ASSURE FAMILIES HAVE IMMEDIATE ACCESS TO FOUNDATIONAL HEALTH AND NUTRITION SUPPORTS NEEDED TO BUILD COMMUNITY HEALTH AMID THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND.

What Federal Policymakers Can Do:

- Continue providing administrative relief to state agencies responsible for delivering SNAP and other nutritional supports, such as schools meals, so that agency staff are able to manage the extraordinary caseloads without diverting attention to time intensive paperwork, ensuring benefits continue to get to families
- Support utility subsidies for internet access to families so both children and parents have access to school, employment opportunities and health care
- Invest in a rapid infrastructure effort that gets Broadband to all corners of our country

» INVEST IN SUPPORTS THAT HELP FAMILIES ADAPT TO THE CHANGING CONDITIONS IMPACTING WORK.

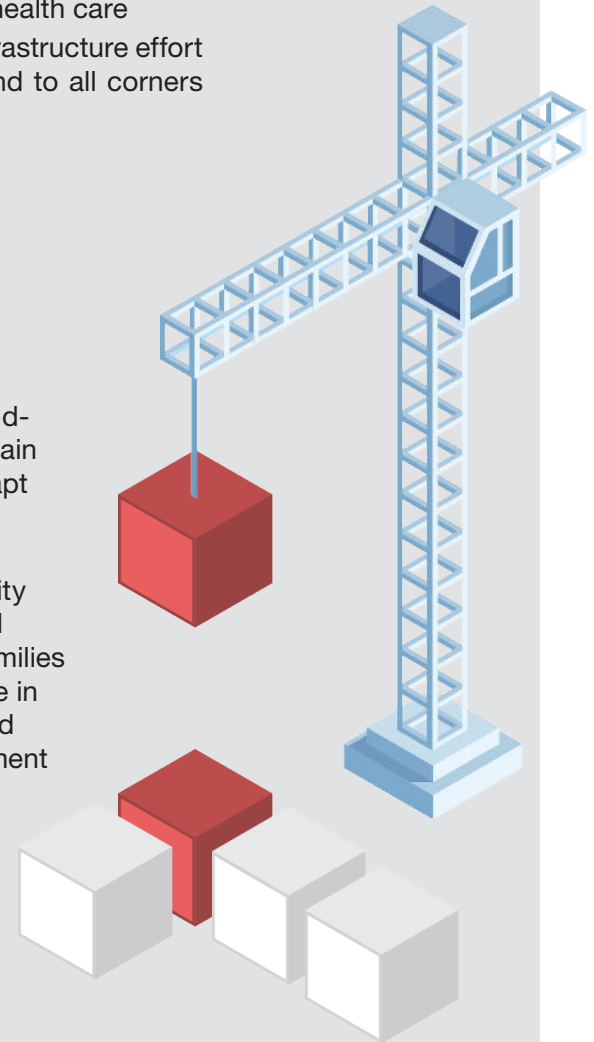
What Federal Policymakers Can Do:

- Provide funding for emergency assistance, work supports, and subsidized employment to help people re-enter the economy safely through a Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Emergency Fund
- Pause months during the public health emergency from counting against families 60-month time limit to receive TANF
- Provide financial support to help child-care providers sustain operations and adapt to new health and safety protocols
- Preserve affordability and access to child care for working families through an increase in funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant

» KEEP FAMILIES SAFELY TOGETHER BY HELPING PARENTS FACING INCREASED INSTABILITY ACCESS SERVICES THAT PREVENT CRISES AND ASSURE THAT BOTH PARENTS AND CHILDREN STAY HEALTHY AND WELL.

What Federal Policymakers Can Do:

- Increase investments in community-based prevention services that prevent and mitigate the trauma families are experiencing during extended periods of social isolation
- Remove barriers for human services agencies to connect families with the services they need to prevent crises and stay safely together
- Provide states with additional resources for parents, foster and adoptive parents, and youth who are getting ready to exit foster care





Laying the Tracks for Resilient Communities Built on Human Potential

Federal leadership is key to rebuilding for the future. We believe the Federal Administration and Congress must help pull key policy and fiscal levers to accelerate conditions on the ground that enable states and local jurisdictions to build thriving communities. Federal investments and guidance can promote economic and social changes that prioritize outcomes over outputs and help families and communities flourish. The Federal Administration – working across the enterprise of the Domestic Policy Council, HHS, USDA, DOL, DOE, HUD, and OMB among others – should foster an environment by which state and local implementers can optimize service delivery systems to work harmoniously in concert with each other. Below we provide the scaffolding for how together we can redesign the human services system to fulfill its role as the cornerstone of building resilient, equitable communities and a revitalized economy. Additional policy briefs will follow.



No matter the policy issue at hand, there are certain practices we encourage our federal partners to consider to spark on-the-ground innovations and help remove roadblocks, including:

- Utilize cross-agency task force(s) that align policy and guidance to promote whole family approaches across the social determinants
- Promote use of federal funding streams to advance race equity and eradicate structural racism
- Support demonstration and waiver authorities to test new approaches
- Support a research agenda that is responsive to state and local practitioner needs and builds equitable and inclusive evidence for policymaking
- Promote outcome-oriented state planning processes that work across programs and services to drive impacts

To achieve this redesign in human services, we believe we must collectively focus on the following three areas with a relentless focus on advancing race equity.

» MOVING UPSTREAM – PREVENTING ISSUES BEFORE THEY HAPPEN.

This means supporting child and family well-being from the outset and preventing issues before they occur. Recognizing the connection between child well-being and adult outcomes, we must advance policy solutions that promote wise investments in people-serving systems that allow families to grow and thrive. We must support the connection of systems that alleviate pressures on families living in poverty. And, we must remember that people facing lifelong, often generational adversity do not engage with systems as blank slates – they bring the cumulative effect of lifelong adverse experiences, based on where they live, learn, work, play and age – the social determinants of health. We know these social determinants have a far greater impact on our overall well-being than was once understood, and traditional health care alone cannot mitigate harmful conditions. Our service delivery pathways must be designed to understand environments that cause heightened, damaging

levels of stress, and must build from family and community strength. We must promote conditions that not only shift our focus and investments upstream, but also undo previous harms, and ensure that new or revised policies do not further perpetuate harm.

How Federal Policymakers Can Help:

- Orient the federal infrastructure to work through a prevention lens, focusing on the promotive factors that support thriving families
- Promote whole family solutions that target resources to communities with the greatest need
- Advance policy and financing structures that leverage public health and Medicaid resources to build primary prevention strategies aimed at mitigating trauma and harms for children and families, with particular focus on maternal and early years interventions
- Invest in research that helps quantify the return on investment of upstream preventive services

» **ADVANCING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY – ENSURING FAMILIES’ SUCCESS FOR THE LONG RUN.**

This means ensuring that we build on family strengths for long term success – not just short-term stability – while simultaneously removing structural barriers that get in the way. To boost mobility, we must invest in the workforce recognizing that parents are both breadwinners *and* caregivers. This requires investing in work supports that bolster job readiness, retention and advancement. We must invest in services tailored to meet the needs of Americans from all zip codes, resetting the foundation for economic mobility. We must promote strategies for families to build assets and wealth that make handling unexpected expenses and saving for higher education and retirement possible. We must also focus on removing unnecessary roadblocks to economic mobility, like mitigating the cliff effect,⁷ and ensuring that requirements like strict asset tests, time limits, and work requirements are not standing in the way of economic mobility.

How Federal Policymakers Can Help:

- Work across the federal enterprise to align workforce and human services systems – especially TANF, WIOA and SNAP E&T – to help people have access to multiple job openings and training opportunities on their path towards upward mobility
- Modernize TANF through a comprehensive reauthorization process with states and localities leading its redesign
- Support states in reimagining a child care system that is nimble in meeting the wide range of work arrangements that parents experience while nourishing their children’s early development and align child care funding in a way that complements work and economic supports to help children and parents reach their potential
- Promote policies that mitigate the cliff effect such as extended or transitional supports for child care, housing or cash assistance that allow families to take a raise or promotion without making an immediate tradeoff in lost supports critical to sustaining family well-being
- Align human services and tax policy to work in tandem to reduce poverty, meet basic needs, create savings, and encourage upward mobility
- Work with states and localities, informed by family voice, to update national poverty and food plan measurements to capture what it truly takes to work, parent, and be a contributing member of a community

7 Benefits cliffs occur when increased earnings from employment are offset by reductions in services, including child care subsidies, SNAP, Medicaid, housing vouchers, and other programs. The impacts of benefit cliffs are well-documented challenges in career attainment and family economic mobility. <https://www.frbatlanta.org/-/media/documents/community-development/publications/discussion-papers/2020/01-benefits-cliffs-and-the-financial-incentives-for-career-advancement-2020-01-31.pdf>

» BUILDING FIELD CAPACITY – STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY OF THE FIELD TO WORK IN PARTNERSHIP WITH PEOPLE AND COMMUNITY.

This means investing in the people and infrastructure that undergird the human services system so it can be nimble, modernized and impactful. To do so, we must:

Support a Skilled Workforce.

The human services workforce is an essential part of the skilled construction crew that allows us to build well-being. Like a registered contractor who knows the best tradesman and tools for the job, the human services workforce helps assess the need and connect people to services and supports that will work for them. To unleash the full potential of the workforce, we must ensure they are healthy and well, and have the modern tools they need to do their jobs. We must create more opportunities for workers to spur innovative approaches and to partner with families to co-create solutions together. And, we must promote workplace cultures and environments where staff and community work transparently together to build the muscle we need to re-design our systems and put an end to structurally-driven inequities.

How Federal Policymakers Can Help:

- Increase resources available for development and training of the workforce that builds the knowledge and skills needed to [advance race equity](#) and promote equitable use of data and analytics
- Extend support for training to community-based organizations that perform under contract with state and local entities

Guide the Way by Optimizing Data & Analytics.

Just as GPS is a powerful tool for visualizing and navigating complex terrain, human services professionals serve this navigation function, drawing on a wealth of data to chart out routes to social and economic mobility. Leveraging the ability of technology systems to collect, exchange and report real-time, quality data is fundamental to making the most of such a navigation system. We must invest in the people and technology required to advance data interoperability and predict and analyze risk if we are to optimize data in the context of community and drive toward shared outcomes.



How Federal Policymakers Can Help:

- Recognize human service as critical supports to health and wellbeing and fund human services infrastructure modernization by funding business designs, processes and IT automation that optimize the use of technology and analytics consistently to Medicaid federal match rates
- Promote cross sector data-sharing
- Enhance the federal interagency structure that readily supports coordination across agencies with common benchmarks that allow states to report efficiently on community-level outcomes
- Provide data-mapping and develop toolkits to help states support data-sharing across human services, housing, health, workforce and education systems and put equity at the center
- Remove unnecessary reporting requirements that divert efforts from working with people to focusing on administrative compliance

Make Evidence Actionable.

State and local human services leaders are committed to investing in outcomes that work for families. Through practical real-world learning, we can identify potential solutions and test them to ensure they work and promote equity, like wiring up an electrical system in a new way and making sure it is safe and operates better than before. We need to foster the capacity of the field to innovate and build evidence from the ground up, drawing on the people most proximate to the community. We need to apply an equity lens to evaluation methods to ensure that evidence-building is focused on strategies that eradicate structural inequities within systems. We also need to better translate traditional research into policy and practice by making evidence relevant, accessible, and actionable. Achieving this requires systematic approaches to connect human services policymakers and practitioners that are building the evidence base in the field with the research community that is lifting up insights for future investments.

How Federal Policymakers Can Help:

- Invest in research and produce guidance that furthers our understanding of how to dismantle structural inequities that exist by race, gender, location, income and other key factors
- Provide helpful tools that assess the effectiveness of interventions and promote evidence-informed decision-making
- Utilize demonstration and waiver authorities to test new approaches within the context of realities on the ground
- Invest in state and local governments to build their evaluation capacity

Conclusion

APHSA is committed to working with our federal partners to find common ground and generate practical solutions to the pressing challenges our nation faces. We stand as a partner and ally with our federal partners. Together we must be navigators guided by a north star of hope and possibility – charting a course for the future through the global pandemic and economic recovery, and beyond to foster conditions that enable equitable economic mobility and well-being for all Americans. When our work is centered on people and public service, building common ground, and partnering across sectors, there is no limit to what we can achieve together.





American Public Human Services Association

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About APHSA

The American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) is a bipartisan national membership association representing the cabinet-level leadership of state and local health and human services agencies, and the subject matter experts that help execute their mission to improve outcomes for people nationwide. Building on our long-standing relationships across the human services field and direct connection to the in-depth knowledge of leaders who administer them, we focus on generating pragmatic, community-wide solutions that advance well-being.

APHSA connects its members to national policymakers and human-serving organizations across a wide circle of stakeholders in the health and human services sector, as well as key partners in education, housing, employment, and others. APHSA also helps members build more capacity for their teams through access to our professional education and development conferences, technical expertise, publications, and our Organizational Effectiveness practice.

Our Vision

Thriving communities BUILT on human potential.

Our Mission

APHSA advances the well-being of all people by influencing modern approaches to sound policy, building the capacity of public agencies to enable healthy families and communities, and connecting leaders to accelerate learning and generate practical solutions together.