

Courageous Imperatives for Human Services

The Connective Force: Driving Health, Well-Being, and Prosperity in America

APHSA's Transition Recommendations for the Administration and Congress



The following paper is the first in a multi-part series that provides recommendations to the incoming Administration and Congress to help develop strategies that unlock the potential of human services. To learn more about APHSA's series, *Courageous Imperatives for Human Services*, and how we can work together to create a country where everyone thrives, visit our [Election Transition page](#).

Introduction

Human services play a crucial role in shaping the health, well-being, and prosperity of the American people. With more than half of Americans receiving human services during the course of their lifetime, this system of services and benefits has become an indispensable instrument that enables individuals, families, and communities to build a better future. The Trump Administration can leverage the human services infrastructure to further national priorities including economic prosperity, better health and well-being, affordable housing and food, and ensuring the labor market meets the demands of American businesses to keep them thriving.

Today, the nation's human services programs help millions of Americans reach their full potential. Through public human services, America provides healthy food from American producers to millions at risk of hunger and malnutrition, ensures access to medical coverage for working families with low income whose employers do not offer health insurance, supports working families to afford housing, delivers workforce development programs that provide skilled workers for in-demand jobs, and ensures independence and supports that allow Americans with disabilities as well as the elderly to live at home.

In addition to the tangible benefits and services provided by the human services system, there is a growing movement to intentionally create hope for both human services participants and the workforce who serves them. Drawing on the "science of hope" research conducted by Chann Hellman and the Hope Research Center at the University of Oklahoma, "Hope is the belief the future will be better than today, and you play a role in making your future possible. Hope, or hopeful thinking, is the future expectation that we can set valued goals, identify the pathways or roadmaps to achieve those goals, and manage the willpower to pursue our goals." As a learned skill, hope can be taught, and human services programs can leverage this framework by working with participants to actively partake in goal setting, mapping a pathway to achieve those goals, and providing other necessary support.

American Public Human Services Association (APHSA)

APHSA is a bipartisan membership association representing state, county, and city human services agencies that improve outcomes for people nationwide through the administration of programs that build resilience and bolster the well-being of people through access to food, healthcare, housing, employment, child care, community support, and other key building blocks. [Learn more](#) about APHSA.



Unfortunately, the nation still faces significant challenges that require bold leadership from the Trump Administration.

- In 2023, **36.8 million** people (11.2 percent of the U.S. population)¹ lived below the official poverty measure and more than twice as many people are estimated to live in households that do not earn enough to meet the basic needs of food, housing, health care, transportation, and child care, despite working full-time.²
- Despite the impact of the nation's nutrition programs, food insecurity remains at alarming levels with 13.5 percent of households and **47 million** people struggling to consistently put healthy food on the table in 2023.³
- Nationally during FFY 2022, **3,096,101 children** received either an investigation or alternative response with **558,899 children** determined to be victims of child abuse and neglect and an estimated **1,990 children** dying from abuse and neglect.⁴
- According to the [U.S. Bureau of the Census](#), over **21 million renter households** spent more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs in 2023, representing nearly half (49.7 percent) of the 42.5 million renter households in the United States for whom rent burden is calculated.
- An analysis of the [National Database of Childcare Prices](#) across 47 states show child care prices for a single child ranged from \$5,357 a year for school-age home-based care in small counties to \$17,171 for infant center-based care in very large counties. These price ranges were equivalent to between 8 percent and 19.3 percent of median family income per child in paid care.

We can address these profound challenges and fuel many of our national priorities by building on the success of the nation's human services programs and making strategic policy changes and funding investments. The following paper provides an overview of the American human services system, how human services contribute to achieving our national priorities, and the actions the new Administration can take to strengthen human services programs so that every resident can be safe and healthy with an opportunity to thrive.

Human Services System Overview

Human services encompass the essential services and supports that every American needs to stay safe and thrive including access to food, healthcare including mental health and substance use services, child care/early education, income support, and workforce development services as well as child and adult protective services. Increasingly, the nation's human services infrastructure also includes prevention services including home visiting, aging in place services, and housing assistance. The human services system bolsters resilience during life's inevitable ups and downs, and, when necessary, provides safety, wellness, and healing in the most familial, community-based settings.

Most human services programs are implemented through shared governance across levels of government. Federal laws authorize most programs, and federal agencies provide oversight and guidance to states responsible for their implementation. States have flexibility in how they administer human services, which creates a variety of delivery models including delivery by state staff, county and city governments, privatization where the primary responsibility lies with not-for-profit or faith-based organizations, and hybrid approaches which combine one or more of these delivery channels. All of these organizational delivery models include the use of private agencies, typically not-for-profit organizations, for direct service delivery and rely on technology solutions to facilitate the work, report program metrics, and gather insights. Most human services are overseen at the federal level by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Labor, and the Department of Agriculture.

Human services programs serve a significant percent of the nation's population, including:

-  **85.6 million** people receiving health insurance through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)
-  **42.2 million** people able to purchase food through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
-  **12.7 million** children served through the child support system
-  **2 million** families served by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program
-  **1.3 million** children in child care
-  **745,000** children receiving payments for foster care or prevention services

The human services system intersects with other key systems of care and opportunity including health care (inclusive of behavioral health and substance use disorder services), nutrition, workforce development, and housing. These intersections take a variety of forms including access to benefits, the direct delivery of services, and cross-system referrals.



Health Care, Behavioral Health, and Substance Use Disorder

- Eligibility determination and insurance provider management for Medicaid and CHIP which provide health care coverage for millions of children and individuals with low income to provide health services, dental services, behavioral health services, and substance use disorder prevention and treatment.
- Addressing social determinants of health through income support and nutrition program participation.
- Active referrals and coordination of services between child welfare agencies and behavioral health providers/substance use disorder service to help families and children get the treatment they need so that children can thrive.



Nutrition

- Eligibility determination, benefit issuance, and service delivery for SNAP, the nation's largest nutrition assistance program which provides income support to purchase food at approved retailers, nutrition education services, and employment and training opportunities.
- Eligibility determination and benefit issuance for Summer-EBT which provides income support to purchase food from approved retailers in the summer months when school meals are not available.
- Data sharing and cross program referrals to support access and eligibility for child nutrition programs including school breakfast and lunch; the Summer Food Service Program; the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infant and Children (WIC); and the Child and Adult Care Food Program.



Economic and Workforce Development

- Both TANF and SNAP require participants to participate in workforce development programs which are typically provided by community colleges, contracted providers, or through agreements with Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funded programs.
- Employers who hire TANF and SNAP participants are eligible for the [Work Opportunity Tax Credit \(WOTC\)](#) and both TANF and SNAP funds can be used to pay for subsidized employment and customized training to meet employer demands.
- Many state child support programs have provided workforce development services to non-custodial parents, and a [proposed rule](#) giving state child support programs the flexibility to provide employment and training services to non-custodial parents using federal funds is out for comment.
- Both TANF and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) provide resources to help working families living with low income pay for child care.



Housing

- TANF income support payments can and are used to pay for housing costs, improving housing stability for millions of TANF households.
- State human services agencies administer the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) which provides income support to households that need support to pay for heating, cooling, and weatherization.
- Continuum of Care services for individuals and families who are homeless.



Early Childhood Education and Services

- Providing early childhood learning opportunities through CCDF, Head Start, and Preschool Development Grants.
- Home Visiting Programs that teach parenting skills, conduct health screenings, and broker community services.



Juvenile Justice

- Child welfare services and prevention services for youth within the juvenile justice system and their families.
- Identification and engagement of family members to support youth in need of placement and/or support.
- Providing behavioral health services to children within the juvenile justice system.



Aging and Disability Services

- SNAP provides nutrition assistance to seniors and individuals living with low incomes and disabilities, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program funds meals at senior centers and adult day centers.
- TANF and IV-E Foster Care provide funds and services to help grandparents caring for their grandchildren.
- Human services agencies provide adult services including adult protective services as well as income support to seniors in adult living facilities and other senior housing options.

Fueling Our National Priorities

Many of our national priorities can only be realized by having a strong human services system. **Economic prosperity** requires a healthy, skilled workforce with access to jobs that pay a living wage. Federal human services programs administered by state agencies like SNAP, TANF, and child support services provide income support and employment and training services to help 55 million individuals who are living with low income put food on the table, pay housing costs, and attain the skills they need to succeed in the labor market for the long term. The resources from these programs can be leveraged to **strengthen the labor market** to meet employer demands by focusing the employment and training investments on evidence-based strategies like industry sector programs, apprenticeships, and in-demand skills training. Additionally, both TANF and CCDF subsidize the cost of child care for families, enabling them to stay employed despite low incomes and the high cost of child care which can exceed the cost of housing in many communities.

Human services programs play a critical role in promoting good **health and well-being** and **addressing key health issues** like obesity, diabetes, heart disease, the opioid epidemic, and high prescription drug costs. State, county, and city human services agencies are the gateways to Medicaid and CHIP which provide healthcare coverage for 80 million individuals and families with low income including key prevention and treatment services for drug addiction, heart disease, and diabetes. The purchasing power of these programs combined with the federally administered Medicare program gives the Administration negotiating power with the pharmaceutical industry and health care providers.

Food security and good nutrition are drivers to better health outcomes, **academic success**, and stable labor market participation. In addition to SNAP, which is the nation's largest nutrition assistance program, WIC and other child nutrition programs including school breakfast and lunch provide both healthy food and nutrition education, creating a strong foundation for healthy eating for 27 million children.

Early childhood programs including Head Start, preschool, home visiting, fatherhood programs, and WIC invest in infants and children, providing them the key building blocks of good nutrition, health care, and social and emotional support from birth to five years that is critical for brain development and lifelong success.

Strategic Action

As we work to build a nation of opportunity for everyone—regardless of where they were born and the social status of their family—we need to ensure that our human services system of public and private providers can meet the demands facing our nation today and into the future. Each individual, family, and community possess different strengths and faces unique challenges. A well-designed, adaptive human services system will give voice to those in need, create hope, and enable community-based solutions that fuel the positive change we seek.

The Trump Administration can provide leadership and implement organizational changes that activate the potential of the human services system to innovate and create greater impact. The following focus areas each have opportunities—including short-term executive actions—that will yield multi-generation benefits.

1

Moving Human Services Upstream: Implementing proactive strategies that address issues before they become crises including primary prevention services and aligning systems to advance community well-being.

2

Advancing Social and Economic Mobility: Serving all generations within a family by promoting policies and programs that support education, job training, and economic opportunities to help individuals and families achieve greater stability and success.

3

Strengthening the Human Services Sector: Investing in the human services workforce and infrastructure including the IT infrastructure to ensure services are delivered effectively and efficiently and that agencies embrace a culture of belonging.

Over the next several months, we will release a series of papers as part of our *Courageous Imperatives for Human Services* series. These imperatives call for a commitment to transformative change and a willingness to take on difficult issues to create a more efficient and effective human services system. Each paper will highlight key challenges and offer a series of concrete actions needed by the Administration.

The *Courageous Imperatives for Human Services* series will cover the following:

- Creating a Comprehensive Support System for Youth with Complex Behavioral Health Needs
- Increasing Economic Mobility through Career and Family Supports
- Designing a Multifaceted Approach to Child Welfare Prevention
- Driving Human Services Technology Innovation
- Building a High Performing, Resilient Human Services Workforce
- Developing an Affordable, Quality, and Accessible Early Childhood System
- Achieving Efficiency, Quality Customer Experience, and Confidence in Public Benefit Programs
- Improving Outcomes and Consistency Across Human Services

APHSa and our members are committed to working with the Trump Administration to strengthen the nation's human services system so it continues to provide foundational support to families across the country. Through leadership, innovation, and executive action, human services programs can become an instrumental tool to attain our national priorities of health, well-being, and prosperity for all. To discuss our recommendations, please reach out to policy@aphsa.org. For media inquiries, please reach out to media@aphsa.org. Visit our [Election Transition Recommendations page](#) for additional publications.

Endnotes

- ¹ Emily A. Shrider, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-283, Poverty in the United States: 2023, U.S. Government Publishing Office, Washington, DC, September 2024.
- ² The official poverty measure is based on a formula from the 1960s that assumes families spend one-third of their income on food and does not account for differences in cost of living across geography. Alternative measures like [ALICE](#) published by the United Way of Northern New Jersey and the [MIT Living Wage Calculator](#) include these factors.
- ³ Rabbitt, M. P., Reed-Jones, M., Hales, L. J., & Burke, M. P. (2024). *Household food security in the United States in 2023* (Report No. ERR-337). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. <https://doi.org/10.32747/2024.8583175.ers>
- ⁴ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2024). Child Maltreatment 2022. Available from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment>.

