



Aspirations for the Future of Human Services Part One: Shifting the Paradigm

As part of APHSA's ongoing strategic work, we held a series of interactive sessions this year with our membership, executive governing board, and partner network, exploring what leaders aspire to for the future of the human services field by the year 2030. Three overarching themes emerged from these conversations:

1. Cultivating service delivery systems that are truly *equitable, human centered* and *community driven*
2. Unlocking the potential of the *human services workforce* (both public sector and community based) to support next generation approaches
3. Partnering with and through *community-based organizations (CBOs)* and *adjacent sectors* to *align systems* and achieve greater impact

Not surprisingly, human services leaders seek transformative, systems-level change while also acting on the immediate needs of the people and communities they serve. To get there is not an easy road and, if we are to live the value of being community led, the adage “it takes a village” takes on new meaning for our collective work ahead.

In Part One of this series, I'm excited to share top takeaways from these conversations. In subsequent posts to our blog, *The Catalyst*, I'll dive deeper into the insights shared around the themes above, including where leaders in the



field believe we need to spend our collective energies to advance systems-level change.

Key Takeaway: To Center Communities, We Need a Fundamental Paradigm Shift in How We Work

A change in how we work is foundational to advancing the equitable outcomes we desire for families and communities to thrive. The shift requires new mental models and a new operating paradigm—across all levels

of government—that puts community at the center. To achieve this, we must reckon with the harm our systems, including human services, have done, while demonstrating that systems can and must work for the common good.

Leaders must play an intentional role in modeling and fostering radical inclusion of youth and parent leaders—acts like building avenues into daily work for hearing from youth and families who have had experience with or are currently experiencing the human services system, hiring staff at all levels with lived experience, and systematically establishing the means for families to contribute to service design with continuous feedback loops built into them.

“There is a need to ‘let go’ of decisions and power that human services leaders have held onto too tightly, often in choices that were never ours to make.”

—STATE HUMAN SERVICES CEO

See *Shifting the Paradigm* on page 32

Key Takeaway: Governance and Operating Frameworks Must Evolve

Moving from concept to operation requires human services leaders and staff to engage in shared experiences and pursue ongoing opportunities to co-discover and co-design with people and communities. Leaders in the human services system recognize that there is not a single formula to apply—we must use multiple strategies and approaches that create the enabling conditions for cross-agency and cross-sector alignment, such as:

- Service delivery design that is human-centered and whole-family oriented;
- “Next generation” supports, including training and technical assistance, for the human services workforce in the competencies and practices of, for example, human-centered design, data literacy, and advancing equity;
- Interoperability of information technology systems and data exchange across systems, including CBOs that are a part of the human services delivery system;
- Use of cross-sector and system shared governance structures that go beyond time-bound advisory councils to provide ongoing learning and feedback loops; and
- Productive narratives and framing that bridge ideologies and help leaders in the field advance efforts on the ground within the specific environmental context in which they are operating.

There is a deep commitment to advancing race equity and an acknowledgment that more support is needed to understand what in the human services systems and service delivery structure is perpetuating inequities. Leaders in the human services field seek support for how to effectively root out systemic biases, publicly recognize the harm that has been done, and move forward intentionally to support communities that have been most marginalized.

We must intentionally examine how policies impact children, youth, and families, not just in the moment, but in terms of understanding the policies that preceded them, how those policies have been built upon each other, and how they have been operationalized in practice over time. At the same time, we must help to humanize and contextualize the tremendous data that agencies collect, both in how they shape what is possible for individual families and how they influence the public’s understanding of what children and families need to thrive. All of this requires deep engagement of both community and the workforce to effect system redesign and ongoing assessment of what is working and what gets in the way of family economic success and well-being.

Key Insights Regarding the Human Services Workforce

Addressing the needs of the workforce is perhaps the greatest imperative facing the human services field right now. Leaders recognize that staff at all levels of the agency, as well as across the many CBOs that public human services agencies work alongside, bear the weight of outdated and misaligned systems. Too often it is the workforce that carries the blame when the systems do not meet society’s expectations. Today’s leaders believe we need to flip this paradigm by investing in our workforce (especially for pay and career development opportunities), listening deeply to their experiences and recommendations, creating a greater sense of belonging, providing the modern tools they need, and supporting ongoing learning in next generation approaches such as human-centered design and community power-building.

Just as we need to sit regularly with youth and families, we must also build feedback loops and establish relationships with all levels of our workforce. We have to listen for understanding of what drives them, and what gets in the way. Then we must map the gaps identified by staff to what we hear from

families experiencing the system. Our role as system leaders is to find the common threads and connect them.

Key Insights Regarding Partnership with CBOs

The fiscal fragility of CBOs that the public sector relies on for delivery of services is far more apparent to state and local leaders than it was pre-pandemic. Leaders witnessed the strain on CBOs first hand, and also recognized how critical CBOs are to connecting with individuals and families, particularly in communities that have long been marginalized. Public agencies must strategize with and through CBOs on ways to modernize information systems and co-design supports that build the capacity of the field. The persistent fiscal and staffing stressors on CBOs must also be addressed if public human-serving agencies are to be in authentic partnership with CBOs toward a shared future state.

Today’s leaders develop and manage through this very difficult landscape, often forced to focus on the challenges and obstacles that divide the system—not on the opportunities and common mission. AHPA is excited to be partnering with Social Current to help equip leaders of CBOs and public-sector agencies to flip this paradigm. For a look at what we are doing in partnership with Social Current to co-create a path forward, read *Shifting Power to Communities and Addressing Systemic Racism: Partnering to Co-Create a New Leadership Framework for Human Services* on page 22.

Stay tuned in 2023! In Part Two, we’ll explore more about what leaders aspire for human services programs and what it means for services to be truly human centered and led by community-driven solutions. ■

