



A NEW PARADIGM IN HUMAN SERVICES

Minnesota's Human Services: A Shift on the Horizon

As County leaders, it is essential to recognize significant transformations that are underway in Minnesota's human services landscape. The entire system is at a critical point where a convergence of factors is rapidly shifting how human services can be and are delivered.

Nationally and locally, human services programs have developed over the decades to solve problems piece by piece. A complex system was created with rules and funding streams that don't easily intersect despite often serving the same individuals. Demographic changes are resulting in a shrinking and more diverse workforce. The pandemic has accelerated that trend and served as a disruptor and innovator across all sectors creating urgency - the way we deliver services today is unsustainable.

If ignored, these factors will widen already existing barriers and constraints that will further impact our ability to maintain a workforce, collaborate with partners, leverage technology, and ultimately, uphold choice and ease for the residents we serve. Now is the time for leaders in the field to think proactively about these changing dynamics to improve future outcomes. Listed below are key themes along with opportunities and challenges that should be considered when trying to influence and address human services programming:



WORKFORCE

Building a future-proof human services workforce

The impact of current workforce shortages in the human services sector will be exacerbated by shifting trends in how people want to work and the changing expectations of today's workforce. It will take significant effort and investment to recruit candidates to the human services field, both in terms of the number of roles available and the need for greater diversity. In addition to the major recruiting challenges ahead, today's workforce is overburdened by a dizzying web of reporting requirements. County human service workers spend an increased proportion of their time managing complex rules, excessive paperwork, and work arounds with antiquated systems and less time dedicated to face-to-face interactions with the people we serve.

- **Opportunities:** Embrace agile technology, support diverse skillsets, incentivize workers, and remove barriers to entry.
- **Challenges:** Growing complexity, risk of secondary trauma, administrative burdens, staff shortages, and worker well-being concerns require urgent attention.





TECHNOLOGY

People leveraging technology to advance their needs

The rapid innovation and advancement of tools has made technology integral to every part of human services. Technology was once viewed as a path toward efficiency and greater impact in human services, but we also realize how technology can interfere with these outcomes. Today, the way that residents adapt to and use technology for their daily life activities has also changed the capabilities and expectations of the people we serve. County human service workers are also primary users of system technology and an audience that is often overlooked in decision making.

- **Opportunities:** Counties have the access and ability to control data analysis, greater efficiency, and streamlined tools can empower residents and free up workforce capacity.
- **Challenges:** Antiquated systems, counties lack influence in state technology decisions, and innovation funding is unevenly distributed.



RESIDENT SERVICE

Adapting to individual needs to support real choices

Person-centered work supports and enables a person to build and keep control over their life, understanding what is important to the person as well as for the person. Counties navigate a complex web of policies to guide human services toward person-centered care in a system that has historically focused only on matching an individual to programs that fit or are available. Counties are constantly creating and designing individualized solutions that meet the needs of the people we serve, rather than creating systemic products and programs that are flexible to meet people where they are.

- **Opportunities:** Culturally responsive approaches, flexible programs, and care that can improve outcomes.
- **Challenges:** Rising demand for high-level support, limited self-advocacy among vulnerable populations, and a complex service system erode trust.



PARTNERSHIPS

Co-creating an integrated statewide service model

While human services in Minnesota are state-supervised and county-administered, counties are often overlooked as a critical stakeholder in making policy and program decisions. Over time, this lack of communication and collaboration between counties and the state has deepened, forcing counties to function through a top-down approach. Innovation is limited by this top-down, risk-adverse administration that further limits counties' collective ability to meet higher needs, higher levels of acuity and funding challenges.

- **Opportunities:** Co-create the future with counties, consider frontline worker needs, and encourage local innovation.
- **Challenges:** A regulatory framework hinders partnership, and the focus remains on compliance over progress.





GOVERNANCE

Understanding the county's changing role

A key question as we consider the trends emerging in the human services system is the county's evolving role. Counties continue to have the primary role and responsibility of providing direct human services to residents in their community, often partnering with communities and community-based providers to meet these needs. Meanwhile, the financing of the human services system continues to reflect the combination of federal dollars, state funds and local county property tax to support the level of service needed in each jurisdiction. As the county's responsibility expands, so must our ability to influence statewide policy and vision for the human services system.

Counties are the cornerstone of human services delivery:

- **Opportunities:** Develop a shared vision with the state that addresses local and statewide needs.
- **Challenges:** Persistent issues, unequal tax burdens, and an unclear "state-supervised, county-administered" definition demand different solution.

The Road Ahead

Minnesota's human services system stands at a crossroads. By recognizing these themes and working together to identify ways to wholistically influence these areas, counties can work to build a more person-centered, efficient, and equitable system for all residents. We invite leaders at all levels to broaden their understanding of the complexities at work in human services and use this lens as we consider future programmatic, policy and funding solutions to the challenges and opportunities.





