

What are Human Services, and How Do State Governments Structure Them?

Executive Summary

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Across the country, the human services sector is critical to helping individuals, families, and communities thrive and optimizing health, well-being, and equity. Yet there is no consensus around which programs and services should be considered human services, and the sector is often misunderstood, underfunded, and underappreciated.

Growing evidence on the importance of the social determinants of health is also shining a light on the critical need to strengthen the human services sector.

THE ROLE OF STATE GOVERNMENTS IN HUMAN SERVICES

States play a central role in the organization, management, and delivery of human services. The full report (see <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/what-are-human-services-and-how-do-state-governments-structure-them>) describes the human services landscape within state governments and uses case studies to show the range of approaches state governments take in structuring their human service systems. It also explores some implications of these structures for alignment and coordination within human services and with the health care sector.

FIGURE 1
Classification of Human Services Programs and Functions



Source: Urban Institute.

WHAT ARE HUMAN SERVICES SYSTEMS?

Human services

- span a wide range of cash and in-kind benefits and individual, family, and community support services;
- span the life course, from the earliest to the latest ages and stages of life;
- are provided in various places and settings;
- are designed, financed, administered, and delivered through a complex array of public (government) and private nonprofit entities;
- can intersect with, but are distinct from, other service systems such as education, health care, and legal services; governments are responsible for paying for most services and benefits; and
- seek to optimize lifelong human development over time and across places and settings and to advance population health, well-being, and equity.

EXAMPLES OF HUMAN SERVICES

- cash and in-kind benefits
- aging and senior services
- child, family, and community services
- disability and independent living services
- workforce development and financial well-being services

Read the full report:

urban.is/3B4SeNC

HOW STATES STRUCTURE THEIR HUMAN SERVICES SYSTEMS

State governance of human services can be multifaceted and complex. State agency structures—which programs and services are administered by which agencies—vary across states and often reflect a state’s attempt to balance tension between specializing in a particular population or policy area and spanning multiple populations or policy areas. State structures differ with respect to the roles played by counties, nongovernmental and community-based organizations, and the state’s executive and legislative branches. The full report describes the range of state approaches along these various dimensions.

HOW ALIGNMENT OCCURS WITHIN HUMAN SERVICES AND WITH HEALTH CARE

Agency structure can create the conditions for alignment and coordination among human services and with the health care sector, but it doesn’t guarantee it. States align and coordinate their human services functions through agency structures, other formal structures, technology, and budget processes. Through our case studies, we discovered nuanced factors that can facilitate or impede human services alignment and coordination with health care. These can include

- a commitment from the governor and leaders at all levels of state government to a unified vision and a culture of alignment;
- personal relationships across agencies;
- regular meetings among human service leaders and those in other departments; and
- circumstances related to the pandemic, including virtual meetings and additional federal funding.

Factors impeding alignment and coordination within human services and with the health care sector include

- competition for limited funding;
- federal or state legislative requirements about program spending;
- agency staff who lack the interest, skill, or cross-systems knowledge necessary for collaboration; and
- the demands of meeting day-to-day program obligations and handling crises.

HOW STATE HUMAN SERVICES GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES AFFECT FUNDING, INNOVATION, AND CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

State human services governance structures have important implications for the flow of funding, pace of innovation, and satisfaction of customers. Issues like politics, relationships, the priorities of the current governor and legislature, and state history and culture can all shape a state’s approach to human services and their specific policy choices.