


Turning Policy into Practice: Insights on Reshaping Public Human Services Delivery from Tracy Wareing, Executive Director, American Public Human Services Association

Every day, all across the United States, the nation's health and human service agencies touch millions of lives. These agencies are servicing record numbers because jobs are scarce and living expenses are high. In a time of sharply rising need and limited budgets, these agencies recognize they need to change the way they do business.

The human service system is now on an unsustainable path; its operations are too fragmented, too focused on process, and too inefficient to deliver on outcomes. The system must move in new directions—down new pathways—if it is to meet increased demand for assistance at a time of tight budgets and heightened expectations. What are the critical challenges and significant trends facing health and human services agencies? How does the American Public Human Services Association's Pathways Initiative seek to transform this system? Tracy Wareing, Executive Director of the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA), shares her insights on these topics and more. The following is an edited excerpt of an interview with me on The Business of Government Hour.
— Michael J. Keegan

Tracy, would you give us a brief overview of the history, mission, and activities of the American Public Human Services Association? When was it created and how has its mission evolved to date?

 **Tracy Wareing:** APHSA is a bipartisan, nonprofit membership organization. We represent public-sector human service agencies at the state and local level. These are agencies that provide nutrition assistance programs, aging and disability services, child welfare, and other types of supports. Our mission is to pursue excellence in human services by supporting our member agencies, informing and working with national policy makers in particular, and working with partners to drive innovative, integrated, and efficient solutions, policy, and practice.




We were created in 1930 as the American Public Welfare Association, but had a name change around the time of welfare reform. We have nine affiliate organizations whose members help administer specific public and human service programs such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, provider of food benefits). We help represent members before national policy makers on issues of human services. In that capacity, APHSA issues policy recommendations. We bring our members together, convening conferences and meetings to exchange best practices and


information; we work to prepare guidance and tools that support our members in their ability to do their jobs and deliver essential services.

We are a 501(c)(3) and have an annual operating budget of around five million dollars. We have about 30 full-time employees, most of whom work in Washington, D.C. We also have hundreds of individual members who are simply interested in the field or who work in the field and want to stay connected to what is happening at the national level.

I'd like to transition to your specific role. Would you tell us more about your duties and responsibilities as the executive director of the American Public Human Services Association?

 **Tracy Wareing:** I work in coordination with APHSA's governing board of directors. I am responsible for helping set our strategic direction and making sure the association operates smoothly. This involves overseeing the budget, ensuring we have adequate revenue to carry out work on behalf of our members. Most importantly, I work closely with our lead policy body that is composed of senior state and local government executives who lead human service agencies. We work together with national policy makers on issues critical to our field and member agencies. We don't really exist without our members. These leaders help me frame the policy positions that we are trying to advance.

Regarding your duties and responsibilities, what are some of your top challenges that you face in your current position and how have you sought to address those challenges?


 **Tracy Wareing:** Many of the challenges we face today derive from the current landscape in which we are operating, and yet with these challenges we see opportunities as well. There is a current trajectory, largely because of a weak economy that has put us on what many would say is an unsustainable path in terms of cost. Human services are largely supports for low-income populations, the unemployed, and others who may need assistance for a period of time. When the economic environment is difficult, the demand for human services increases, but in many instances, given budget realities, resources decrease. Add to this a highly polarized political landscape marked by conversation and debate about the appropriate role of government and it becomes quite difficult to advance national policy.

It is a real challenge, but we need to cut through the noise and really talk about what it is the system is intended to



do. It's not intended to create dependency on government. It's really about creating avenues and using early interventions and prevention efforts to ensure that these people are on the path to self-sufficiency. It requires us to really think through how we talk about our work, convey what it really looks like, and do a much better job of showing our return on investment or our social return on investment, if you will. I think those are some challenges for the field that we really need to do a better job of addressing.


Tracy, you mentioned that with the fiscal realities of today, now more than ever leaders have to act with strategic intent, and what I mean by that is focus on the goals, vision, and objectives necessary to achieve an agency's or an organization's mission. Would you tell us about your internal vision for your organization going forward and briefly highlight some of the key strategic priorities?

 **Tracy Wareing:** I couldn't agree more with the premise of your question: that to provide value in these times, a membership association like APHSA has to support those in the field. Doing this enables us to realize our desired future state as well as provide practical steps for how to get there. In the last year, we have launched our policy and practice

agenda. To get to the heart of your question about strategic priorities, it's really about a commitment to work within our field and beyond to drive positive change that realizes better outcomes with greater impact but at less cost. In the end, we are looking for ways to achieve better, more sustainable results for the people that are served through the public human services system.

It's about anticipating what is coming down the pike and positioning the organization to take advantage of those opportunities. Our Pathways: the Opportunities Ahead for Human Services effort ... identifi[ies] solutions that keep us focused on achieving the outcomes that we want to see for people who live in our communities. A critical part of our strategic work and priorities is to position this agenda not just as a set of [static] recommendations found in documents, but as something that our members can actually use and employ in their own states. This involves cultivating a greater network of partners that can help us start to think about what the next generation of health and human services looks like in this country.

Tracy, you mentioned that the system that we're talking about is unsustainable. Some say it is too fragmented, too process-oriented, and arguably too inefficient to deliver on the outcomes sought. You referenced the launch of the Pathways initiative that responds to this situation. Can you tell us a little bit more about its overarching goals?

 **Tracy Wareing:** Let me start by elaborating on what we envision as our desired future state. I think that provides context on the vision frame in our Pathways initiative. From our members' perspective, the desired future of human services involves making it person and family-centered, modern, responsive, and not based on a one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter approach. It is also important that the desired future state, along with focusing on long-term outcomes, must also foster accountability. I hear that probably more from my members than anything else ... that they want to see a system that has as its end accountability. They want to see money used wisely and effectively to achieve real outcomes. Through Pathways, which was developed in coordination with APHSA's state, local, and affiliate leaders, we are articulating our vision for a transformed human service system and for the outcomes such a system can help achieve, and are building support for concrete action to make that vision real.

Recognizing we can't do this alone, we approach finding solutions across the federal, state, and local level. To that

end, there are conversations rethinking how to govern, in other words, in a more shared manner. There are a number of other partners from private industry who work in this field and provide an incredible amount of insight. We have to maximize those relationships and think about things in a shared governance approach.


We are also looking at new funding models, new ways that we can actually finance the human services system. There is certainly a push for thoughtful but aggressive adoption of innovations. I can't tell you how many times I hear about incredibly successful efforts happening in states, in local jurisdictions, that are having very real impact on communities and driving positive outcomes. We are also creating a virtual center that will catalyze breakthrough thinking and action and provide a locus for more experimental, transformative work. The center has identified four initial areas of focus—Alternative Financing, Adaptive Leadership, the Government's Role in the 21st Century, and Social Return on Investment. [You can read the Innovation Center issue brief: *A Framework for Alternative Human Service Financing.*]

As part of this effort to build awareness, expertise, and consensus in the human services community around the Pathways vision and framework, we are distributing Pathways concepts more broadly through specific policy recommendations rooted in strong practice. We have released Pathways


briefs that outline policy recommendations and priorities for current human service programs based on how they can lead toward the Pathways outcome goals identified by the association. At the centerpiece of Pathways are four major outcomes that we seek:

- Achieving gainful employment and independence
- Stronger families, adults, and communities
- Healthier families, adults, and communities
- Sustained well-being of children and youth

Tracy, as a follow-up, how are you engaging front-line service providers to inform both the direction of the Pathways initiative as well as incorporate lessons learned?

 **Tracy Wareing:** In trying to advance a particular policy, it is incredibly important that we draw lessons from the ground-level experimentation that is happening. One of the ways in which we are doing this is with our Raising the Locals Voice Initiative. We are collecting stories from local human service agencies and communities about innovations that lead to improved outcomes for those most in need. There are incredible lessons to be learned from successes, but there is also benefit to knowing what didn't work. We are sharing both stories, highlighting practices on human service program collaboration or integration that is resulting in either lower costs or improved outcomes. We have a number of these stories available on our website.


What are the characteristics of a 21st-century health and human services system and to what extent does realizing such a system rest on shaping a new business model for health and human services delivery?

 **Tracy Wareing:** We've done some pretty extensive thinking in this area with a lot of input from our partners. We have established a new business model with some criteria that we think have to be in place. We could do all of the greatest thinking in the world on policy, but if we haven't readied the system at the state or local level to be able to move that forward, we won't get very far. We are pursuing a policy and practice agenda because we recognize that [practice must inform policy] and that any systems or policy changes need to be made operationally.

I'd like to discuss the role that information technology plays in your efforts to successfully transform human and health service delivery. How is your organization seizing the opportunities and tackling the challenges associated with the



intersection of IT and service delivery? Also, how are the affiliates or the agencies using social media to meet mission?

 **Tracy Wareing:** Technology is certainly a major enabler for getting to the desired future state of integrated and interoperable systems at the human services level. We have so many technological advances in this country that can eliminate duplicative administrative steps and save money by streamlining our business practices.

We have data sharing and analytics that can help us better understand what works and what doesn't work. The whole growing field of predictive analytics can help us understand trends and ensure that our programs are as effective as possible.

We have a couple of things that are happening in the association that I think are worth mentioning. First of all, we have our IT solutions management affiliate that brings together leaders supportive of technological advancements in this area to share their best practices; we always think about the way we can leverage technology to enable the changes we desire in this field.

I think that mobile technology is completely changing the way we think about service delivery. I often say to folks, if you asked me five years ago when I was still in the state of Arizona about putting our applications on mobile smartphones, I'm sure my answer would have been ... most of the populations we serve don't have cell phones. Today that has changed dramatically. There was a report released recently that identified the fastest-growing population acquiring cell phones and smartphones [is the] low-income population. We have to be thinking about that in terms of ease of use and what this trend to mobile environments means for government efficiency.

There are some incredibly innovative ideas being put in play. There is something called Casebook that is being implemented in Indiana, which is based on a platform similar to Facebook. It is for supporting child welfare. There are online communities of practice popping up all over the place that are connecting leaders at all different levels of government to their peers in other jurisdictions. There is more that we need to do. Our organization as an association hasn't leveraged the social media component in the way I think we need [to]. We have a community of practice that we have built in partnership with Harvard that we are looking to expand. We know we at the association may be behind in using social media, so we're looking to private industry to really help us figure out how to leverage it.

Tracy, APHSA's vision for a transformed human service system includes reexamination of the current financing structure. Some observers believe that funding provided through the traditional state, federal, and local appropriations process will remain stagnant, if not continue to shrink. To that end, would you elaborate on the framework for alternative human service financing?

Tracy Wareing: First, it is helpful to understand how the current system works. It's pretty fragmented and siloed in the way that it gets delivered; it typically has rules. For instances, the SNAP program money has requirements; so does the Title 4E funding. Not all of these programs are under just one congressional committee. You can't just go to one congressional committee and say fix it all. When we talk about an alternative system, what we're really talking about is the ability to have the best use of those resources.

You'll hear people talk about social impact financing or social impact bonds. You get an outside investor who comes in and says okay, I'll put up the money and agree to help pay for services over time based on the achievement of certain

outcomes. Once those outcomes are achieved, then government comes in and pays the investor back for what they have provided plus an incentive or a bonus. It is a very different way of thinking about how we could finance some of the services in this country. This is a model that has been tested in England. There are several jurisdictions—New York City, some cases in Minnesota—that are exploring this more deeply. We really are thinking outside of the box and willing to experiment in ways that get to the outcomes that we desire.

Tracy, I would like to understand more about the National Workgroup on Integration. Could you tell us a little bit about its mission? How is it developing guidance tools, disseminating best practices, and possibly recommending changes to laws and regulations?

Tracy Wareing: The National Workgroup on Integration was developed to think about the integration of the health care side into the human services side. It has a very diverse membership. We have 14 states, four counties, and seven businesses that are active participants. It is a real collaborative effort of public-sector health and human service leaders in coordination with private industry to identify ways to integrate health and human services and create a sense of urgency for system transformation.


The screenshot shows the website for the National Workgroup on Integration. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links for Home, About, Business Models, Eligibility, Finance, Governance, Technology, and News Room. Below this is the APHSA logo and the title 'The National Workgroup on Integration'. The main text discusses the challenges of rising health care costs and the need for integration, mentioning the Affordable Care Act and the workgroup's mission to develop guidance. At the bottom, there is another navigation menu with links for APHSA, About, Business Models, Eligibility, Finance, Governance, Technology, and Contact Us.



The group itself has focused on providing guidance to states on how best to think about a governance structure for an integrated health and human service delivery system. What are the technology pieces that you have to be thinking about and what is that new business model? We've done work providing timely FAQs, frequently asked questions for our members when new federal guidance comes out. Last year, we did a seven-part webinar series highlighting what participating NWI states are doing in this area. These states were able to share in more detail the way that they are approaching the integration of their health and human services. There will be some additional guidance, particularly around financing and how we might think about doing it. We have developed something called a maturity model that has helped states figure out where they fall in a continuum of integration. There is some pretty exciting work that is happening. For example, San Diego County has a multi-year initiative called Live Well San Diego that is really about linking their systems and reengineering the way that they do their business across [the] health and human services spectrum.

Along with developing guidance and providing tools to help APHSA members achieve integration across health and human services, we are also gathering and disseminating best practices that enable leaders to strategically position their organization for system improvement. When necessary we are also going to recommend changes to laws and regulations.

What are some of the major opportunities and challenges your organization will encounter in the next couple of years, and how do you envision your office will evolve to meet those challenges and seize those opportunities?

 **Tracy Wareing:** We're a membership association and membership associations have gone through changes, often reflective of what has happened within our own member agencies. We don't have the same kinds of resources we had before. I think this is a constant challenge, working within a limited resource environment while making sure we do what's best for our member agencies. Resource limitations keep an organization properly focused on mission. We also go back to our members and get their insights. Our mission is interesting in that we represent across the political aisle and across the states and localities. I think there is a huge opportunity for our members to be a voice about how to arrive at bipartisan solutions, find ways to transcend differences, and focus on what we have in common. We want to focus on identifying solid solutions that get us to that next generation of health and human services. Our hope as an association is that we can play a critical role in making this happen. ■

To learn more about the American Public Human Services Association, go to www.aphsa.org.



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