

Human Services as Societal Capacity Builder: Discovering the Path to a 21st Century Model to Address Poverty

By Nancy L. Polend

Designed to help rebuild the nation's capacity in the aftermath of the Depression and reinvented in more recent years to build capacity for the latter half of the 20th century, the public human services sector has always had significant influence on the nation's capacity. Whether helping widows of the 1930s and 1940s become financially independent, assisting individuals gain skills and enter or adapt to a changing workplace, or more recently, assisting families with a wide array of services to help them become self-sufficient, the helping system has been in the business of capacity-building since it was created three quarters of a century ago. A lot has changed since that time; the rate of societal change is now exponential and the helping system has had to reinvent itself several times over to continue to meet the ever-changing conditions and needs of our society.

Does the public human services sector see itself as a societal capacity-builder today? Perhaps the capacity-building purpose of the sector has been obscured by the complexities of modern society, the exponential rate of change, or the by the weight of the administrative details involved with the very reinventions it has undergone. Perhaps social values about individualism, capitalism, women, and work have converged to create a confusing dilemma for a system designed to *help* people navigate their way to self-sufficiency. Perhaps we as a nation are unsure how to strike the correct balance between societal and individual responsibility. Perhaps all or any of the above is true and the public human services identifies more now with being in the "poverty" business than with being in the business of building societal capacity. Whether it currently sees itself as a major societal capacity builder or not, the fact is that the public human services sector has the individual and collective capacity of almost 36 million people now living in poverty in its hands every day. That's a lot of people and a lot of potential capacity for our economy and society.

Like reflecting on the pages of an old high school yearbook, we will take a brief journey back in time, pause to notice where we started and how far we have traveled, peek around the corner a bit to see where our path might lead us in the future, and then dream a little about reconnecting with our leadership role in building the nation's capacity in the 21st century. While the dreaming may be uncharted territory (as all contemplations of the future are), a compass setting and an initial framework are offered as a foundation for guiding us toward making the dream a reality. After all, whether we are ready for it or not, when we close the metaphorical yearbook, it will be

time to get to work on the next chapter of human services in the book of our nation, and we might as well have a place to start.

The Path Traveled: Human Services Historical Role in Societal Change

For more than two hundred years, the dance between social values and public policy has continuously increased societal capacity by creating ever-improving, sustainable conditions for individuals, families, communities, and society. Basic rights initially given solely to white males slowly made their way to women, African Americans, and immigrants, and basic protections in the workplace and in financial matters were established for more and more individuals. Though often spurred by tragic events— even war— the pace of the dance toward sustaining the nation’s capacity plodded along until the societal jolt of the Great Depression, when a frenetic flurry of public policy resulted in the creation of the “helping system” that serves as the foundation of our current public human services sector. It was then— when a significant portion of society found itself vulnerable to poverty— that the American people demanded protection from further or future hardship (Masters, 2005). It is also from these beginnings that the helping system was associated with both building societal capacity *AND* addressing poverty.

Social safety nets were created via the Social Security Act, which included Aid to Dependant Children, designed to financially support mothers (generally assumed to be widows of working men killed in mines or factories) until they could either move back home or remarry (Masters, 2005). The social value at the time was that women should not work outside the home, so assisting them when their breadwinner husbands died was not a controversial topic. In addition, unemployment insurance was established, designed to see those who became unemployed through difficult times. The American Public Welfare Association (now the American Public Human Services Association) was also born during this time, as an evolving professional support system for the evolving societal support system.

With the economy booming in the 1940’s and 1950’s, Rosie the Riveter supplementing family income, and war veterans returning home to ample jobs, the helping system required little change. The civil rights movement began to draw more media and societal attention. The 1960’s brought the first major helping system reinvention via the “War on Poverty,” the creation of the U.S. Poverty Index, and an enlargement of the helping system. New programs and changes in existing ones sprang up to help people avoid or get out of poverty, as defined by the U.S. Poverty index, which was and still is based on an income-food consumption model of a typical 1960’s family. Public human services responded to the new conditions by aligning its systems, strategies, and structures with the definition of poverty, or more accurately, with keeping its customers from falling within that definition. Despite the good intentions of the war on poverty, this era in public human services history perhaps marks the beginning of the turn away from the business of societal capacity-building toward the business of “poverty.”

From the birth of the initial safety net programs, the intention of building capacity was reflected in policies requiring specific moral or behavioral criteria to be met and by requiring some form of reciprocal action toward self-improvement as a condition for assistance. Requiring such changes has resulted in both the intended consequences of increased individual capacity to participate in society and the unintended consequences of entrenching the idea of the “deserving poor” (those who meet the requirements) and the “undeserving poor” (those who don’t). Over the last several decades, increasingly specific behavioral requirements have been implemented, and in more recent adaptations that reflect changing societal values about women, a strong focus on work. Social values that women should not work outside the home shifted to women may work outside the home, to women must work outside the home, and by the 1990’s, the entitlement-based public assistance system was perceived by much of society as a an “undeserving free ride.” The opportunity to work had by then transformed into a requirement, and as a result, the public human services sector reinvented itself again.

Built on the early foundation of eligibility and entitlement, the public human services system was, in the mid-1990s, faced with a new, expanded mission – to move its customers from being dependent on public assistance to becoming independent and self-sufficient. This new, expanded mission required an entirely different array of services than did the eligibility/entitlement system and involved an entirely different definition of success. This particular reinvention – moving from a focus of correctly assessing eligibility for and administering benefits to getting customers ready for work, working (if able), and/or able to provide for themselves and their families – was a significant challenge. New systems, structures, strategies, and competencies were established in the system to move people from welfare to work (e.g. assessment competencies; strategies and structures for child care, housing, education, transportation, mental health; technology systems, etc.). As a result of this latest reinvention, public human services has played a significant role in building societal capacity by helping people acquire skills and knowledge, assisting individuals address a wide array of capacity-reducing obstacles, and putting more people into the workforce than ever before.

Walking Toward the Fork in the Path: Important Choices Ahead

In 2005, the public human services sector finds itself with some important choices ahead about its next phase of reinvention. The progress it has helped facilitate by moving more people from dependence on public assistance to employment is commendable. However, because of a host of economical, technological, and national security challenges that have occurred since the last reinvention, those same people and many others find themselves in or on the brink of poverty, despite the fact that they are working. Having successfully aligned its operating philosophy and operations with the social value of the importance of work and a 1960’s era Poverty Index, the public human services sector faces the new dilemma of what to do when more people are working, but they are still poor.

With the Information Age, the resulting knowledge economy, and several major economic and national security challenges conspiring to create the ingredients for another human services reinvention, the nation will likely need a helping system more aligned with the societal capacity-building mission than with the “poverty” mission. For economic reasons, the nation needs as many people as possible producing and consuming to move it forward and to keep it secure; having only two-thirds of us doing so means that the nation (and its economy) is only operating at two-thirds capacity. For moral reasons, as a nation built upon the principles of caring and unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the institutions of our society must ensure that it provides the mechanisms for *each person and group* to recognize and achieve their potential. Last reinvented a decade ago under extremely different conditions, the current helping system may find itself better suited to help people live within poverty than it does to help each person achieve their potential, and in so doing, build societal capacity. The question for the public human services sector is not whether it can reinvent itself to meet the latest challenges – it has demonstrated over its 75-year history that it can – but rather, what should this reinvention look like and how do we begin?

Clearing a New Path: Human Services as the Navigator

The public human services sector has an important leadership role in a larger societal change toward a fundamentally different way of thinking about and addressing poverty – so fundamentally different that addressing poverty is considered a societal capacity-building function. “Poverty” can only be the starting point and acknowledging that human services’ has a leadership obligation for beginning the transition toward a focus on capacity-building is an important first step. After all, the human services sector:

- Has a mission to help people make their way toward health and well-being and works directly with children, adults, and families experiencing difficulties in achieving them. *It knows the people.*
- Sits as a sector in society that sees and experiences through its work more of the conditions of poverty than any other sector. *It knows the issues.*
- Sits as a sector that experiences daily the disconnect between what is needed to build the capacity of each individual and the policies and structures that are in place to do so. *It knows the gaps.*
- Sits with influence on policy at the Federal, state, and local levels. *It knows the decision makers.*

Since the above is true, human services is in a unique position to see the systemic nature of the conditions of poverty and its many parts, and to begin to retool and refocus the nation on continuously increasing its capacity as a whole. The public human services can lead the way by developing ways to leverage the hundreds of billions of dollars the nation spends annually on “poverty programs” to get a return on the investment that has not been realized while the system focused on “poverty.”

Creating the 21st Century Model to Build Societal Capacity: A Foundation for the Human Services' Journey into Uncharted Territory

If mapping out the specific route for the journey were easy, it would probably already exist. If the public human services sector is to fulfill its leadership obligation to society, it must map the details itself, based on the wisdom of its 75 years. It is always helpful, however, to have a compass setting from which to begin planning the route. A compass setting—by way of a theoretical construct including imperatives, mission, vision, and guiding principles for change—is offered below as a basis for further discussion and the development of specific plans for the journey. The construct/compass-setting is extracted and modified from APHSA's initial work with the Office of Community Services on the 21st Century Model to Address Poverty project.

Imperatives for Change (Why We Should Make the Journey in the First Place)

All worthwhile journeys begin with at least one good reason to go somewhere. Among other reasons, we should make this journey because:

- The United States has no conceptual framework to serve as a foundation for its approach to addressing poverty and building societal capacity, despite its vast investments in anti-poverty efforts. We need to begin the work needed to fill that void so that we as a society can begin to realize a return on the investment we are making in our own future.
- We know that as the number of people living in poverty increases, it becomes more and more difficult for any society to sustain itself. None of us wants that for our nation. As long as many of our citizenry remain under-optimized, our society can never reach its full potential.
- Despite significant investment in addressing poverty, persistent poverty exists.
- We currently spend hundreds of billion dollars in poverty-related programs without an acceptable return on the investment.
- We have a moral imperative to take care of one another, as our “brother’s keeper” as intended in the founding documents of our nation.
- Individuals living in poverty do not have full access to and participation in the democratic system, though such participation is a right provided in the founding documents of our nation.
- No one in a country this rich should have to live an impoverished life.
- We have an economic imperative to ensure that the capacity of individuals, communities, and the nation for innovation is encouraged and sustainable.
- Poverty is costly to taxpayers, wherever they live, via the costs associated with social services, remedial education, law enforcement, welfare programs, etc.
- Individuals living in poverty are not able to fully contribute to the country’s economy or innovation. The stakes of allowing that to continue are high and the

benefits of ensuring that every person is able to contribute fully in society as a producer and a consumer are many.

These imperatives provide a small sample of moral, economic, and social reasons why changing the way this country thinks about and addresses poverty is worth the effort. There are obviously many more reasons why such a change is in *everyone's* best interest. We should encourage every sector of society to think about the reasons why it would be in their specific sector's best interest to reduce the number of people living impoverished lives, to build societal capacity, and to develop change strategies in order to reach their own potential as a sector.

Mission (The Directional Compass Setting)

No journey can begin without at least some idea about the direction in which the travelers would like to go.

Our direction is to change the way this country thinks about and addresses poverty toward a societal approach to maximizing the potential of its citizenry. We want to create urgency in society to do the work of this recalibration, such that it views eliminating poverty as:

- an exercise in developing self-sustaining conditions at the individual, family, community, and societal levels,
- a win-win exchange between society and individuals, individuals and institutions, and
- a way to create the harmonious conditions that allow for continued innovation, economic growth, strong relationships, non-violence, health, etc.

Vision (The Destination)

If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there. If we are successful over the long-term, societal capacity will be maximized and fewer people will live impoverished lives because:

- Poverty is viewed by the mainstream as a condition that is broader than the amount of income a person makes.
- Society proactively plans for decreasing the number of people living impoverished lives.
- Communities proactively plan for decreasing the number of its residents living impoverished lives.
- Individuals proactively plan for a future for themselves that is not impoverished.
- The education sector proactively plans and implements strategies to reduce the number of people living impoverished lives.
- The human services sector proactively plans and implements strategies to reduce the number of people living impoverished lives.

- The financial services industry proactively plans and implements strategies to reduce the number of people living impoverished lives.
- The health industry proactively plans and implements strategies to reduce the number of people living impoverished lives.
- The justice system proactively plans and implements strategies to reduce the number of people living impoverished lives.
- The philanthropic sector proactively plans and implements strategies to reduce the number of people living impoverished lives.
- The Federal government focuses its programs and policies on enabling the above.

These statements provide the ultimate goals of this reinvention and each statement serves as a placeholder for each sector to develop its own change strategies aligned with the principles suggested below.

Guiding Principles (A Foundation for Developing the Map)

Any useful map includes guideposts and landmarks to guide the traveler during their journey to help them get where they want to go.

New ways of thinking about and addressing poverty aligned with maximizing societal capacity should be built upon the following principles:

Shared vision: New ways of thinking about and addressing poverty are built on a hopeful, shared belief in equal and unalienable individual rights and the profound belief in the human potential of every individual to succeed.

Person-centered: Effectively and efficiently assisting individuals in need means that the service delivery structure must focus on the needs of the individual or family, not on the needs of the helping system.

“Poverty” as we know it is only a starting point: Traditional definitions and mental models about poverty (e.g. models based exclusively on income determinants, which suggest poverty as a population) are starting points only.

- “Poverty” is a condition that is broader than the amount of income a person makes. Income is only a part of an individual’s ability to make life work and to be a productive member of society. Human potential depends on different types of capital –social, economic, and spiritual.

Reciprocal Responsibility: Full and equal responsibility for maximizing potential lies with the individual to society and with society to the individual. This means that our strategies must be equally focused on societal/institutional behavior and individual behavior.

Consistency with America’s tenet of market solutions: Infrastructures and mechanisms to assist those in need should be developed by tapping into private

resources and market solutions. Doing so would geometrically expand the resources and possibilities for maximizing societal capacity.

Everybody has a role: Every sector of society (government, private industry, non-profit, communities) has a role in creating a nation of capacity, reciprocal responsibility, and opportunity. These roles may or may not be consistent with current roles.

- *The role of systemic interdependence:* No one policy, program, community, strategy can create a nation of maximized capacity, reciprocal responsibility, and opportunity alone. Therefore, each part of the system is dependent on the other for creating that future.
- *The role of individual performance:* All parts of the system (read: nation) must fulfill their own obligations toward maximizing potential for capacity, reciprocal responsibility, and opportunity in order for the whole system to be successful.

Change is necessary: We cannot create a nation of reciprocal responsibility and opportunity using these principles without fundamental change occurring in every sector of society.

Leveraging resources: We should strive first to make wiser application of existing resources in all sectors of society. Doing so encourages individuals or systems to align and strategically use the resources they have toward the outcome of success, as they have defined it.

Continuing the Journey: Where Do We Go From Here?

Recognizing that no theoretical construct can, in itself, create change, develop operational plans, or implement anything, this construct is simply meant to serve as an initial plan for a journey into uncharted territory, laying the groundwork for the future direction of the country's efforts to address poverty and build societal capacity. Creating the actual change and developing and implementing operational plans must, as always, be done people.

Where we go as a helping system and how we get there depends on what each of us does in our own areas of influence, with our own competencies, with the resources we control, and with our professional and personal relationships. We can begin by initiating dialog among ourselves, our colleagues, and our strategic partners about this construct, how it does or does not resonate with our work, how our work would need to change if we grounded it in the principles of the construct, what we would need from other sectors of society, and how we could begin to influence our environment to create such changes.

The coming reinvention will require leadership at the Federal, state, community, and individual levels. The public human services sector has 75 years of wisdom about the issues, the people, the policy, and the system and has a long history of reinvention to meet the prevailing conditions and societal needs. It has successfully retooled,

restructured, and rethought its mission before and a look at where our path has led us tells us it is now time to help clear the way for the next journey. Now more than ever, the nation needs to operate at its fullest capacity and the public human services can play a critical role in building it.

REFERENCES

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Nancy Polend is an organization development practitioner who served as the Project Manager for Creating the 21st Century Model to Address Poverty project at the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA). The project's goal was to launch a sustainable social movement to change the way this country thinks about and addresses poverty, and was sponsored by the Office of Community Services, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Nancy develops and delivers training and consulting services to state and local human services agencies across the country. She helps human services agencies build and sustain high performance by training and consulting in the areas of leadership development, building high performing organizations, leading change, and personal mastery. She enjoys developing diagnostics, tools, and models to plan for and implement organizational change, which has become her most used and valued specialty.

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