

Can You Change Negative Perceptions About Government Aid?

Many people think the work of human services agencies creates dependency and exacerbates poverty. But there's a new effort to recast them in a more favorable light.

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The field of social services is dogged by a messaging problem. That's the conclusion from a report commissioned by the National Human Services Assembly, a group representing nonprofits in health and human services across the country.

The group decided to look at improving its public relations efforts after a decade of seeing the human services sector experience cuts in government funding and stagnant charitable giving. "There was this sense," says Ilsa Flanagan, a program director with the group, "that with the arguments we have been making, nothing was working."

The report last year is part of ongoing research by the FrameWorks Institute, which specializes in helping nonprofit organizations recast social work in a more favorable light. Both the assembly and its partner, the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA), hope that by "reframing" human services, they can gain greater public support, increase funding for services and focus more attention on preventive measures.

The institute's initial analysis zeroed in on a public relations problem for human services: Laypeople and professionals in the field disagree about why human services exist and whom they benefit. In March 2013, FrameWorks interviewed 20 people from three metro areas with an even mix of political leanings to represent public perceptions of human services.

Researchers found that "the public focused on the idea that the individual is the cause and solution for the problem," Flanagan says. People in general tended to believe that giving away money creates dependency, and that investing in organizations that provide human services actually exacerbates poverty. To complicate matters, most interviewees said they thought government was too inept and corrupt to be effective in providing human services.

Professionals who work in human services, on the other hand, perceived poverty and unemployment as byproducts of systemic, structural issues beyond an individual's control. "If a young child grows up in a neighborhood without good parks or preschools, if the child's parents don't make a living wage, it's hard for the child to thrive and develop," Flanagan says. "Human services experts understand those connections."

The assembly and the APHSA are using the report's findings to offer practical advice to their members. "We fall into the same trap over and over again," says Anita Light, an APHSA program director. "We talk about the problems -- how children and families are suffering because we don't have enough resources." Instead, Light says agencies should refocus the conversation around success stories in human services.

One state that's ahead of the curve in experimenting with ways to reframe human services is Colorado. When Reggie Bicha became head of the state's human services agency in 2011, he and his staff rewrote their mission statement. Notably absent was any mention of "the poor," "the vulnerable" or, their bureaucratic equivalent, "low-income households."

"We don't see ourselves as serving just the needy and downtrodden," Bicha says. Between services for the poor, the elderly, victims of domestic violence, and people struggling with mental health and addiction issues, chances are that most Colorado residents will interact with human services or will know someone who has.

The key, says Bicha, is to celebrate successes and communicate those stories to citizens. "We don't do a very good job of talking with the public about who we are, what we do and what we aren't able to do."



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