

Is It Time to Stop Saying the Safety Net?

The three largest groups representing human services agencies and nonprofits say the phrase hurts their work -- and society at large.

ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN GOVERNING MAGAZINE

BY J.B. WOGAN | MARCH 27, 2018



(Shutterstock)

For decades, politicians, the media and the public have used a simple phrase to describe government programs that help people afford necessities like food, housing and health care: “the safety net.” Now, three national groups that represent public agencies and nonprofits that administer those benefit programs say it’s time to retire the phrase.

"For a lot of people, 'safety net' can feel like that deeper end of the system that is more costly and that people stay on for a long period of time. That's really not the case," says Tracy Wareing

Evans, president and CEO of the American Public Human Services Association, which stopped using the term several years ago.

The Alliance for Strong Families and Communities and the National Human Services Assembly, which both represent nonprofits in human services, have also dropped the phrase from their communications. Moving away from the phrase is part of a larger push "to show how health and human services, if it's delivered effectively, are supposed to work on the ground," says Evans.

It turns out a lot of people don't know the full scope of who "human services" actually helps.

When FrameWorks Institute, a research firm, [asked people](#) if they had heard the term human services and what they thought it meant, most guessed that it was related to nonprofit and government services helping the poor. They "did not associate such organizations with older adults, children or persons with disabilities until asked about these groups explicitly," according to FrameWorks.

Polling also shows that language can shape whether the public supports a human services program.

For example, advocates for cutting Medicaid, the government health insurance program for the poor, often refer to it as "welfare," which has less public support than Medicaid. A [January survey](#) by the Kaiser Family Foundation, for instance, shows that 32 percent of adults support reduced spending for "welfare programs" -- but only 12 percent support reduced spending for "Medicaid."

That's likely because while most Americans support Medicaid, the term welfare carries negative connotations.

Asked whether "welfare benefits give poor people a chance to stand on their own two feet and get started again" or "make poor people dependent and encourage them to stay poor," 54 percent said it makes people dependent, according to a 2016 survey by the *Los Angeles Times* and the American Enterprise Institute, a right-leaning think tank.

Dropping the term safety net is part of the human services groups' broader strategy to get the public and policymakers to think of human services as investments in the community that boost

the economy, reduce crime and improve public health. For example, child participation in the food stamps program has been [linked](#) to better health in adulthood, such as reduced incidence of obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes. And some evidence suggests that Head Start [reduces](#) the likelihood that children will be arrested or charged with a crime as adults.

“We know we need to do a better job as a sector in telling the story of what our work does, why it’s important to society, why people benefit even if they don’t see themselves as direct recipients of services,” says Bridget Gavaghan of the National Human Services Assembly, who's working on a project to change the way people talk and think about human services. “Because we haven’t done such a great job of that in the past, people have really entrenched in unhelpful views about the work that we do.”

Instead of talking about the safety net, the groups want people to think about access to employment, housing, education and health care as “building blocks” necessary for a metaphorical "house," or community's well-being. They emphasize that communities are interconnected, so services that help one household or neighborhood succeed ultimately benefits everyone.

“Well-being is something that is built, just like a house is built,” says Gavaghan. “When we talk about constructing well-being over the course of a life, we are able to talk about things like prevention, we’re able to talk about things like ongoing maintenance, and we’re able to talk about things like why that might need to be restored or repaired over time.”

Some places are already adopting new language.

Boulder County, Colo., [says](#) it's "building a healthy, connected community." The District of Columbia [seeks](#) "to empower every District resident to reach their full potential." San Diego's Health and Human Services agency [describes](#) its goal as "promoting wellness, self-sufficiency and a better quality of life."

Nonetheless, many agencies across the country still talk about their purpose in terms of providing public assistance to low-income people or children and families in crisis.

"People have used [safety net] for so long," says Evans. Shifting to a new vocabulary "is not necessarily easy to put it in practice."

**This story has been updated to clarify that the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities and the National Human Services Assembly stopped using the phrase "the safety net" in their communications.*



[J.B. Wogan](#) | Staff Writer | jwogan@governing.com | [@jbwogan](#) | [Google+](#)