

## STATEWIDE NETWORKS:

# Advancing and Strengthening Human Services

## Executive Summary

Representing a diverse portfolio of organizations and interests, statewide human service networks serve a critical role fostering healthy communities. Moving information between and among human service organizations, nonprofit organizations, state government, and the philanthropic sector, these networks provide a range of benefits for members, clients, and the broader communities they serve. Operating in their own unique ecosystem of change makers, statewide networks are critical to the human service sector, helping to advance the interests of organizations that serve communities, families, and individuals. This study describes human service networks in terms of their structure, membership, and functions, policy priorities and practices.

The following data sources were collected and analyzed:

1

Internet searches to identify a preliminary sample of statewide networks

2

Online survey of 26 human service networks from 22 states

3

Semi-structured interviews with 18 organizations from 14 states

Our samples consisted of networks that represent a range of private human service programs and providers. These networks had a statewide influence and provided a mix of functions such as training and advocacy.

### Most of the networks:

1. represented their entire state,
2. liaised with state-wide government,
3. provided membership benefits (including education, training, discounts, purchasing power, etc.), and
4. represented a breadth of human service entities.

## Key Findings:

Statewide networks serve as capacity builders and as a voice for the sector. Human service networks convene, support, and represent organizations that address multiple areas of the human service delivery system, such as including support for the unhoused, behavioral health, older adults, youth services, and other social services. Even though states each have their own unique characteristics such as political climate, Medicaid expansion status, and scope of the human service sector, we found that many of these statewide networks perform very similar functions.

One of the most critical functions of these networks is advocating for human service policy priorities with state, local, and federal government agencies. Statewide human service networks are in a unique position to amplify voices from local communities, present the perspective of those working in the sector, and to educate policymakers about the implications of proposals and subsequent implementation. The majority of organizations surveyed engaged in policy or advocacy work (100%), education and training (100%), member benefits/discounts (96%), and research (69%).

### Our analysis of the qualitative data illuminated four key functions of statewide networks:

1

#### Visibility

Providers are addressing urgent needs within communities and depend on networks to publicize issues to policy makers and foundations. Networks synthesize and elevate trends and issues that are emerging from the field and the communities they serve.

3

#### Brokering

Networks communicate, advocate, and negotiate to optimize resources, policies and program priorities within the sector and between key stakeholders. Networks build capacity of localized human service organizations through their advocacy role to foster political actions.

2

#### Connecting Stakeholders

These networks engage in bilateral communication between policymakers and service providers. Networks highlight differential service needs between urban, rural, and suburban communities. These groups also compile member organization's unique needs to provide a holistic perspective to decision makers

4

#### Infrastructure in Waiting

Networks address ongoing and unanticipated needs of the sector. In times of crisis, statewide networks have been at the forefront of action and advocacy. During a crisis, statewide human service networks convene leadership in the sector to provide a critical platform for education, action plan development, and information sharing on a statewide level.

In this rapidly changing sector, large collaborative networks will be critical for ensuring that providers, governments, and funders are ready and able to address some of the most pressing issues of our time. Statewide networks, with their diverse representation and multiple roles, function as a nexus for community.

Operating in their unique ecosystem of change makers, service providers, and funders, these statewide networks are critical to the human service sector, helping to advance the interests of organizations that serve communities, families, and individuals.

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Aeshna Badruzzaman's research focuses on NGO-government partnerships and interdisciplinary and practice-based methodologies at the intersection of political science, sociology, international development, and economics. Her current work supports efforts to bridge the research/action

gap by providing a range of capacity-building experiences and developing curricula, programs, toolkits, and other learning experiences that make the science of early childhood actionable and support the field in increasing the impact and scalability of innovations

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Monica McBride is a student in the Master of Public Policy program at Northeastern University's School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs. She is primarily interested in policy and program evaluation, especially as it pertains to issues of affordable housing and homelessness. She is also curious about the use of mapping software to further understanding in social science and evaluation research.

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Hannah holds a Bachelor of Science in Human Services from Northeastern University and has a professional background in political organizing and communications. She currently works as the Communications Coordinator with Sierra Club Illinois in Chicago.