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Table of Contents

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	**2**	**3**
Internet searches to identify a preliminary sample of statewide networks	Online survey of 26 human service networks from 22 states	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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Discipline: Public Policy

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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Overview

In addition to the robust public human service sector, there are over 100,000 private non-profit human service organizations that serve communities across the United States, providing critical services to millions (*NCCS Project Team, 2020*). While substantial research has been done regarding community-based human service delivery, less is known about the organizations that represent them: statewide human service networks. These networks have evolved to elevate the concerns of their human service organizations, and by extension the broader communities they serve.

The goals of the project were:

1	2	3
Identify the functions and roles of statewide human service networks	Examine and describe their policy priorities	Summarize how the COVID-19 pandemic and calls for racial justice impact their work

Lee et al. (*2020*) studied service coordination patterns across various human service areas. They concluded that sparse connectivity was common and that few organizations function as "super-connectors" (*Lee et al., 2020*). They identified several internal and external factors such as lack of trust or centralized communication systems and limited internal resources that inhibited capacity for optimal coordination across organizations. This critique mirrors wider concerns within the sector including a lack of coordination of services, redundancies, and a reactive approach (*Ragan, 2003*).

Although service coordination is an ongoing opportunity for improvement, there is a unique need to represent the human service sector broadly and align its work in a systematic way, something that statewide human services networks seek to accomplish. This report highlights research undertaken in 2021–2022 to define what statewide human service networks do and describe their contribution to the human service ecosystem.

Methods & Data Sources

We focused our investigation on statewide human service networks that had the following criteria. The networks 1) maintained a broad focus, 2) are composed of private organizations, and 3) primarily represented organizations that provide a social service function. In many instances, these networks used the word "nonprofit" in their title. Data collection developed from three main sources.

Web based searches

Internet searches were used to determine statewide human service organizations for all 50 states, Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico. Search terms included key words such as "state nonprofit association," "state human service agency," and "state human service association." Web based information was utilized to determine the organizational size, scope and primary activities. Organizations were included in a final database if they represented the entire state, liaised with state-wide government agencies, provided benefits to their members and represented a broad range of human service entities, versus single issue specific organizations. Our current study identified 52 networks.

Online survey

Internet searches provided a foundation for subsequent survey development. A survey instrument was designed aimed at understanding the roles, functions, and activities of statewide human service organizations. All networks identified in the internet research were sent an invitation to participate in a Qualtrics survey. In states where broad networks were not identified, the research team identified statewide groups that were more issue or population specific or regional organizations that served a similar function. Some states had more than one organization in their state that met our criteria. A total of 91 organizations were recruited to participate, and 45 surveys were completed across 31 states. A total of 26 networks met the criteria for broad human service networks and were included in subsequent analysis.

Online interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to develop a more holistic understanding of function, priorities, activities, and challenges. A total of 32 networks were contacted for individual interviews. Interviews were conducted with 17 statewide networks in 14 states.[1] With the exception of Texas, all interview data consisted of networks that met the following criteria: 1) representation of the entire state 2) liasoning function with state-wide government, 3) membership organization that provides benefits to their members (including education, training, discounts, purchasing power, etc.), and 4) represent a breadth of human service entities. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded for themes within NVivo.

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[1] Three stakeholders interviews were completed in Texas where the statewide network had recently dissolved. These interviews did not meet the explicit criteria cited, but were included because of the transitional nature of the state human service structures.

Findings

Definition of Statewide Human Service Networks

Representing a diverse portfolio of organizations and interests, statewide human service networks provided a critical role in fostering healthy communities. In their central role, they moved information between and among state run and private human service organizations, nonprofit organizations, national associations, the philanthropic sector,[2] and state and national governments. These networks served as capacity builders and as a voice for the sector. Although networks existed at local and regional levels, this research examined networks that represented their entire state *and* served a variety of human service organizations. Human service networks convened, supported and served organizations that represented diverse populations and their related services, including: cash benefits and other economic support; child and family welfare; juvenile detention; aging and disability, including behavioral health; and services related to the unhoused and those with housing insecurity. Even though states each had unique characteristics such as political climate, poverty rates, Medicaid expansion status, and scope of the human service sector, we found that many of these statewide networks performed very similar functions.

Activities of Statewide Networks

Human service organizations operated within a broad network of government entities, funders, advocacy groups, and community-based organizations. Harmonizing and coordinating these stakeholders has been a long-standing ambition among those working towards social change.

Although there are barriers, statewide networks are uniquely situated to function in a super-connector role for human service providers. Furthermore, their position allows them to communicate and collaborate across other large network groups including state and federal governments, institutions of higher education, private philanthropy, and national advocacy groups. Statewide networks strive to improve service provision on the local level while advancing larger social change goals.

"Tapping into network connections is becoming the norm for social change makers, whether they're mapping influential relationships for an advocacy campaign, coordinating a protest to fight climate change or spreading an approach to community engagement. For funders, working with a network mindset is a prerequisite for remaining relevant in a world of fast-moving information and ideas, and persistent, complex problems."
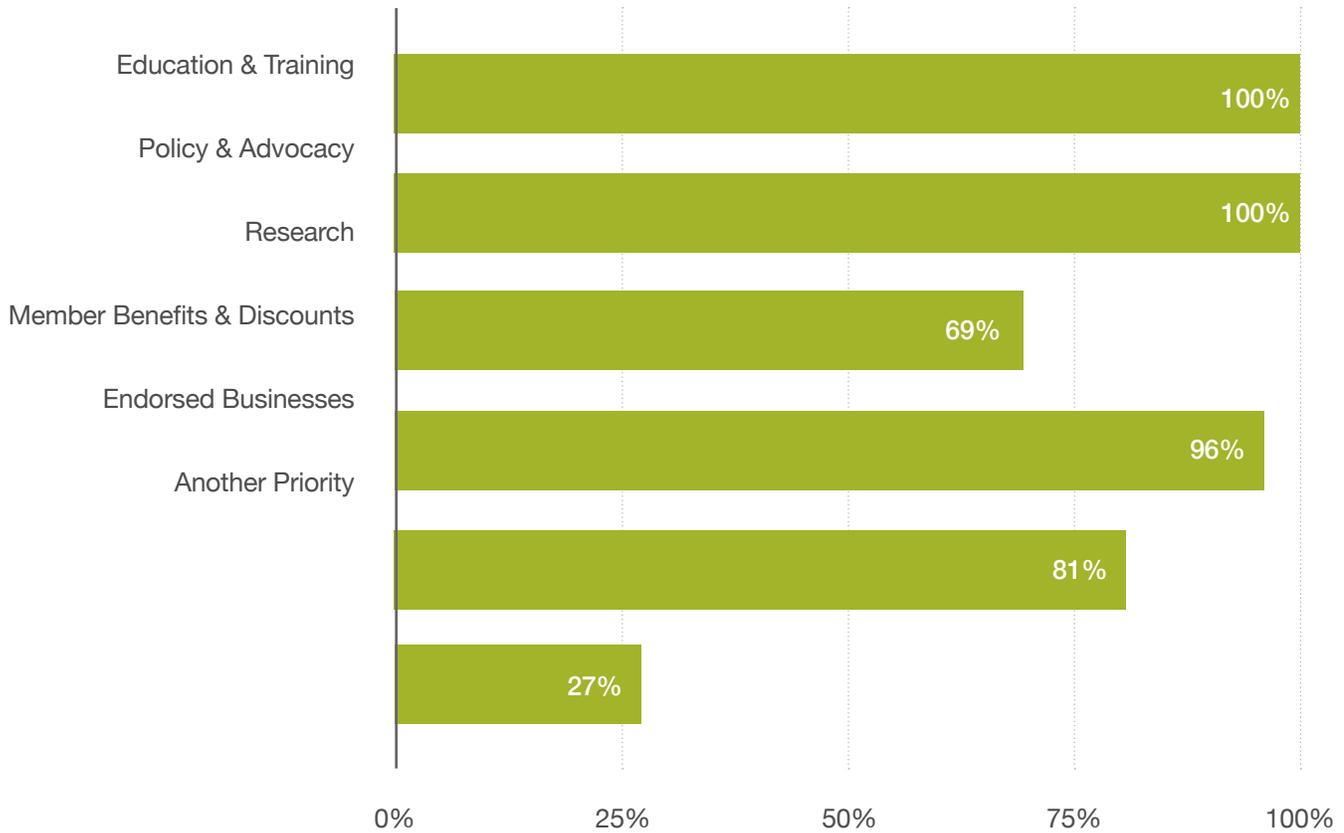
— SCEARCE, 2011, P.11

One of the most critical functions of these networks was 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 as part of this research project, engaged in policy or advocacy work (100%), education and training (100%), member benefits/discounts (96%), and research (69%). Organizations who reported engaging in "Another Priority" reported engaging in: consulting, convenings, networking, online board matching, and collective impact. Some human service networks also reported working to support the entire human service sector via workforce development, staff retention and recruitment, continuous quality improvement, and resource development and accessibility.

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[2] State run human service organizations are defined as those that are funded and managed exclusively by state government, private human service organizations consist of mission driven organizations with 501 (c)3 status.

# Figure 1. Statewide Human Service Networks Organizational Activities

ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Education & Training — 100%
Policy & Advocacy — 100%
Research — 69%
Member Benefits & Discounts — 96%
Endorsed Businesses — 81%
Another Priority — 27%

Note. Survey sample n=26. Endorsed businesses refers to the process where some Human Service Networks provide endorsed business partner programs in which the network partners with a vendor (e.g. a healthcare company) to channel partners to the vendor's product or associated services.

Statewide networks prioritized external outcomes for organizations and communities, while balancing their internal and operational considerations. Many of these networks were dependent on dues and "fee for service" work such as consulting, strategic planning, training, and educational services. Some networks had more established relationships with and received funding from philanthropic entities.

Figure 2. Characteristics of Statewide Human Service Networks
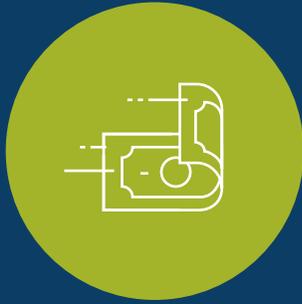
Statewide networks largely function by members who pay dues

About 11% of the networks had less than 150 members. Slightly less than 40% had between 600–749 members. Nearly 31% of networks had over 750 members.

About half of the statewide networks had operating budgets under one million dollars.

Note. n=52 (Online internet data source.)

Diverse state needs, infrastructure, and histories had driven some statewide networks to recruit members beyond human service organizations. Illinois Partners for Human Services, for example, "represents a wide range of human service fields in Illinois that build community well-being, including health care, mental health services, early childhood services, after school programs, services for persons with disabilities, job training, workforce development, affordable housing, nutrition programs, immigration services, domestic violence prevention, substance use disorder treatment, and care for older adults" (*Illinois Partners for Human Services*).

Each state network responds to the unique conditions and organizational ecosystem within which they operate.

"Illinois Partners for Human Services is a coalition of about 800 or so health and human service organizations. The vast majority of those are human services, but we incorporate health because we do have a few community-based health centers, and other health providers, which has been very important in COVID, showing that interconnection. We are a very broad statewide coalition. We have partners in every County in Illinois."

— INTERVIEWEE

Advancing the Human Service Sector

Qualitative interview data and analysis identified four functions that statewide networks provide to advance, serve and integrate the sector: 1) visibility, 2) connecting stakeholders, 3) brokering, and 4) infrastructure in waiting.

1 Visibility

Statewide human service networks synthesize and elevate trends and issues that are emerging from the field and the communities they serve. Within this role, they balance content and population-specific needs within the broader statewide service sector. Statewide networks are especially essential during periods of crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, statewide networks were critical in assuring that local human service needs were addressed, and that local human service providers were granted some of the same protections and benefits that were made available to small businesses. Since many human service providers were responding to the urgent needs of their clients, it was hard to communicate immediately to policymakers and larger philanthropic entities. Statewide networks were able to aggregate the needs of many local providers and make the problems and solutions more visible.

Figure 3. Statewide Human Service Network Functions

3 Brokering
Advocate and negotiate to optimize resources, policies, and priorities within the sector and between key stakeholders.

2 Systems Perspective and Feedback Loops
Facilitate bilateral communication between policymakers and service providers

1 Visibility
Statewide and elevate trends and issues that emerge from the field

4 Infrastructure in Waiting
Address ongoing and unanticipated needs of the sector

STATEWIDE NETWORKS
Critical Functions

Note. *Themes from n= 17 interviews*

Systems Perspective and Feedback Loop

Statewide networks engage in bilateral communication between policymakers and service providers. This can be especially important at the state level, given that most states identify regional differences that shape their unique needs within the human service sector. For example, there may be differential service needs between urban, rural, and suburban communities. Member organizations can communicate their unique needs to statewide networks, which then provide a holistic perspective to decision makers. With their unique statewide perspective, these networks can identify how shifts in resources or policies (e.g. regulatory or funding shifts) in one area might have a ripple effect on other areas of the sector. Funding priorities within one area of human service may help or hinder other service providers. At the organizational level, these statewide funding shifts may be misunderstood or obscured. Organizational insights from the larger statewide networks can help balance the sector's priorities and shift resources to where they are most needed while limiting the impacts of unintended consequences.

Almost all of the networks surveyed stated they collaborated with state or federal agencies (92%). In addition, they worked closely with issue and population specific networks and other national groups or networks that represented the human service sector. Of the organizations surveyed, approximately 85% stated that they were a member of the National Council of Nonprofits and 8% stated they were a member of Social Current (formally Alliance for Strong Families and Communities). Involvement in these organizations allowed for multi-level information flow (regional, state, and national). Communication about state level issues to the national level was critical for agenda setting. In this way, statewide networks provided a "super-connector" function, influencing local, state, and national practices and outputs.

Figure 4.
Statewide Network Collaborations
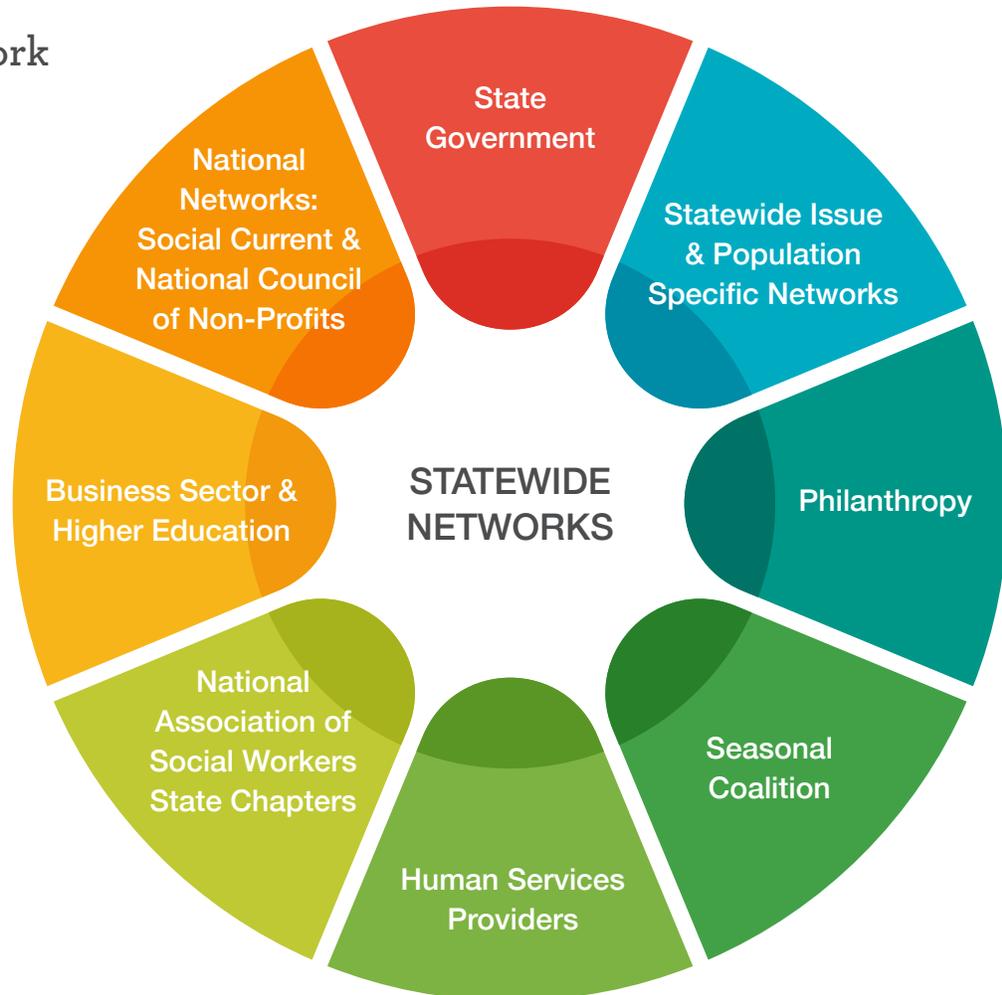
3 Brokering

Beyond information provision, statewide human service networks served an important brokering function where they communicated, advocated, and negotiated to optimize resources, policies and program priorities within the sector and between key stakeholders (including policymakers and funders). An interviewee emphasized the complexity of representing hundreds of human service providers while working with stakeholders, "... developing relationships within the state administration, developing trust with the administration, as well as members of the media, and other kinds of local officials … there are landmines you don't see coming sometimes".

Although these networks primarily focused on issues that impacted the sector broadly, they also worked closely with many statewide groups that represented the interests of issue or population specific groups, such statewide housing or behavioral health groups. In this role they provided technical assistance to these organizations while also acting as a clearinghouse of information helping to align the sector.

As a result of their broad perspective and understanding of the various players and organizations in their respective states, this brokering function also consisted of a filtering and orientation role. Interviewees referenced their informal consultation role with emerging organizations. Well-intentioned new organizations that lacked an understanding of existing efforts could unintentionally dilute available resources. An interviewee emphasized, "it's almost too easy to become a nonprofit in this state". Statewide networks provide information about existing efforts to promote collaboration and reduce redundancies.

Policy Priorities

One of the most important functions of statewide human service networks was their advocacy work. In this role, they impacted local communities, families, and individuals by providing a macro-level perspective on resource allocation and distribution. Advocacy activities of statewide human service networks rangde from connecting local human service organizations to resources at the local, state, and federal levels, connecting organizations with one another, and providing broader support for employees within the sector. Human service networks also lobbied on behalf of specific legislation to bolster, fund, and support the human service sector.

Sub themes that emerged in this study under brokering included: community investment, community engagement, supporting human strengthening the capacity of human service organizations, and protecting the sector from threats to autonomy and health.

Community Investment

Many networks were shaped by the multiple crises facing states at the time of this study, including racial injustice, the COVID-19 pandemic, and for many Western states, raging wildfires. A few organizations focused policy and advocacy priorities around improving racial equity through various strategies such as improving workforce diversity. These priorities were informed by or at least aligned with the summer of 2020's political moment of racial reckoning. The intersection of the racial justice movement and the COVID-19 public health crisis also amplified the need to prioritize an increase in community-based resources, as well as expand broadband access as much of the country moved to virtual work and school. These shifts revealed dramatic gaps in coverage by race, class, and region and had considerable implications for the delivery of human services.

At the time of this study, human service networks' policy and advocacy priorities ranged from supporting children and families through a continuum of care, expanded access to childcare, reforming foster care, and working to support the Family First Prevention Services Act's (FFPSA) implementation.

Community Engagement

In addition to investment, some human service networks focused efforts to increase community engagement in the areas they served. Many of these were political advocacy efforts, whether in terms of broad civic engagement or mobilization efforts to pass specific legislation. At the time of this study, many networks also organized communities around census engagement in order to both increase the number of marginalized community members counted and monitor the subsequent redistricting. Other community engagement priorities include working with low-income families to make it easier for them to access programs, and providing information and resources across urban and rural divides.

Supporting Human Service Workers

A key policy priority across many networks focused directly on the sector's workforce. Many of the networks' policy and advocacy priorities involved pay and pay equity. Our research indicated that employment benefits were also policy priorities including student loan repayments, Paid Family and Medical Leave, and unemployment benefits. Other policy priorities focused on the reimbursement structure within the human service sector, which rarely reflected the actual costs of programs or workers' efforts. For example, some reimbursement structures lacked compensation for travel costs and volunteer mileage reimbursement.

> "We constantly go back to advocacy in the state budget, [because the state] voted to increase the minimum wage, [but] reimbursement rates didn't increase. In fact, they decreased in some places for years and years and years… If we want the minimum wage to increase, which we do because our employees need and deserve to be paid more… It's really about trying to find those common threads [like reimbursement] that also affect everyone."
>
> — INTERVIEWEE

Human service issues also existed in the context of hiring, retaining, and supporting human service workers. Throughout interviews and survey responses, statewide human service networks expressed overall concerns about compensation structures and competition between the private human service sector and state-run organizations. Private human service organizations often had difficulty hiring and retaining their workforce, as they were unable to provide the same compensation and benefits as state-run providers. Some statewide human service networks also addressed the need to streamline human resources management through their advocacy work. For example, networks identified barriers in navigating the hiring and training processes. Throughout this study, organizations described routinely advocating for simplified and less expensive background check processes, more staff training and professional development resources, and broader investment in workforce development to meet the needs of human service organizations.

Strengthening Capacity of Human Service Organizations

A primary goal of the statewide human service networks was to develop capacity within the human service sector. Several statewide networks described their capacity to address organizational burdens and identify areas for improving cross-sector efforts. One Texas organization explained that statewide networks "build the capacity of the capacity builders." Capacity building examples were diverse, ranging from conducting or supporting research and press releases to contracting with outside organizations for advocacy and educational programs and support for the sector. Networks prioritized decreasing the cost and potential risk individual organizations faced in expanding

their work and service provision. As such, many advocacy efforts focused on lowering the rates of liability insurance, providing umbrella healthcare policy for all state nonprofits, and decreasing the cost burden of organizations providing unemployment benefits.

Protecting the Human Service Sector

Several networks described defensive strategies to prevent or monitor legislation or budget cuts that would negatively impact the human service sector. Many networks reported focusing on advocacy efforts to obtain more resources allocated to the sector from the state, including innovative approaches such as creating a charitable deduction on state taxes and increasing the money funneled to the sector from the PILOT (Payment in lieu of taxes) program. Other state networks reported working to ensure resources, particularly those related to COVID-19 relief, funneled to the state-level from the federal government. These efforts included advocacy for Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) resources, state COVID-19 relief money, and broader nonprofit inclusion in COVID-19 relief bills. In states without Medicaid expansion statuses, networks prioritized health care access as a policy issue.

National advocacy strategies were not just related to federal dollars, however. One network reflected on focusing their policy priorities on increasing philanthropic transparency in funding practices. Other networks highlighted attempts to increase nonprofits' involvement and visibility at the federal, state, and local levels by educating policymakers on the sector's needs and impact or seeking an Essential Services designation. One network described their work reviewing specific contracts and Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to protect nonprofits.

Health

Unsurprisingly, given the critical role of human service organizations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, several human service networks highlighted health as an advocacy and policy priority at the time of this study. Networks' priorities fell into two broad areas: specific populations and broader health resources and infrastructure. Several networks described particular policy priorities regarding the health and well-being of children, whether through investment in mental health support, resources for youth experiencing homelessness, or school safety for children with special health care needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other examples of prioritizing specific populations included modernizing the definition of Intellectual Disabilities in the

criminal code and supporting policies for survivors of sexual assault and intimate partner violence. More broadly, a majority of networks focused policy priorities on improving broader health infrastructure. At the time of this study, some priorities were COVID-19 specific, such as monitoring the pandemic response, mobilizing the response and recovery efforts, and bridging foundations and nonprofits who supported local COVID-19 relief. For some networks, the COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity to advocate for related issues and infrastructure. For example, in Alaska, the statewide network advocated to expand access to and usage of telehealth. In Maine, they worked to increase funding for safety net services for mental health and substance abuse. Both issues were exacerbated dramatically by the social isolation and stress of the pandemic.

Networks included in the study reported additional health related advocacy efforts, including advocating for community-based rates for mental health services, protecting Medicaid benefits, seeking federal funding for behavioral health services, and broader efforts to create a system of quality health care across the lifespan.

4 Infrastructure in Waiting

A strength of the statewide human service networks was their ability to address ongoing and unanticipated needs of the sector. In times of crisis, statewide networks were at the forefront of action and advocacy. While human services have always responded to emergency situations such as natural disasters or domestic or international terrorism, its ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic showcased the strengths of local human service organizations.

During a crisis, statewide human service networks convened leadership in the sector to provide a critical platform for education, action plan development, and information sharing on a statewide level. This was particularly true for networks responding to the pandemic. In this role, networks worked to ensure education and training of their members, developed supply chains for critical services, and distributed Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). In addition, statewide human service networks identified gaps within the sector and areas in need of federal economic aid. Many local providers leaned on statewide networks during the pandemic to convene, facilitate and interpret events and policies.

COVID-19 highlighted the need to have robust and well-functioning statewide human service networks so they can be activated in times of crisis.

"Everything we did tripled in terms of numbers of convenings, community participants, consulting clients, both paid and free, everything was up. Because in a crisis, in an uncertain environment, just gathering and sharing out the information and translating, what that meant for us as nonprofits was critical."

— INTERVIEWEE

Networks' Changing Policies and Practices to Support Organizational Needs

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, community-based organizations pivoted activities and modified ways of working in order to respond to the myriad of needs. These local shifts required the statewide human service networks to do the same in order to respond to the needs of their members. According to the networks surveyed, 92% changed their policies and practices due to COVID-19, with an even higher proportion (96%) also reporting engaging their member organizations in new activities. Similar to many other sectors, human service networks increased online modes of operation and online member engagement with virtual options to keep them updated as information regarding COVID-19 and subsequent relief measures evolved. They facilitated information sharing through the creation of new affinity groups focused on COVID-19 for executive directors. Additionally, they focused on members' needs around COVID-19 related expenses (i.e. expenses associated with transitioning to working from home, acquiring and distributing PPE, etc.), essentially, "collecting challenges and attempting to locate solutions." One interviewee described working with other state agencies to ensure human service providers working with the public were protected.

"In light of COVID, we had a very collaborative relationship [with the Department of Public Health] where we distributed about 1 million KN-95 masks to 500 organizations statewide. Because we're so broad, we've been able to partner in these very specific ways to get PPE out to people."

— INTERVIEWEE

In their role, networks communicated between members to enable human service organizations to adapt programs and effectively deploy resources as the pandemic and its subsequent impacts evolved and increased demand for their programs.

> "We were assessing…what they (food banks) had to make so that they could do their jobs. Food banks were number one in terms of what they needed for PPE. (We were assessing) their needs as well as our home health care and different behavioral health centers and what they needed in a medical direct care setting….. So not only do we report to the governor, to the administration, but we also helped inform our contacts with the press and the media to help when those messages weren't being heard."
>
> — INTERVIEWEE

Networks also increased training and informational sessions to ensure members had the necessary knowledge for accessing COVID-19 relief.

> "We added an entirely new set of programs working to educate and train organizations receiving CARES Act funding on federal compliance requirements. We created a COVID-19 toolkit for providers that addresses anything from agency practices to vaccines."
>
> — INTERVIEWEE

Addressing Resource Challenges Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

In addition to conducting training sessions, statewide human service networks developed shareable resource guides focused specifically on COVID-19 relief. An interviewee explained that helping nonprofits navigate COVID-19 relief became a "number one priority." Although these resources were welcomed, some networks expressed frustration that there would be a large but short-lived influx of federal funding that would assist in the interim but would likely make organizations scramble to maintain programming long-term. While the increased access to resources allowed for the development and implementation of programs and services, the study networks noted that they anticipated concerns over funding and capacity sustainability.

Networks also provided critical information for organizations on fundraising, specifically assisting in the pivot to virtual fundraising when major in-person fundraising events were canceled. Interview and survey participants emphasized that best practices did not exist, but rather, "we had to build them."

Human service networks provided guidance on the state and local level on how human service organizations could use and/or allocate the influx of resources that were coming into the state in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e. via the CARES Act and stimulus funding). As one interviewee explained "a major part of my job will be helping organizations track those dollars and opportunities moving forward in the health and human service space. Trying to make sure that the state has some kind of fair and transparent process." We were assessing…what they (food banks) had to make so that they could do their jobs. Food banks were number one in terms of what they needed for PPE. (We were assessing) their needs as well as our home health care and different behavioral health centers and what they needed in a medical direct care setting….. So not only do we report to the governor, to the administration, but we also helped inform our contacts with the press and the media to help when those messages weren't being heard.

Networks also increased training and informational sessions to ensure members had the necessary knowledge for accessing COVID-19 relief.

Navigating Shifting Landscapes

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, human service organizations depended on statewide networks to develop strategies on reopening offices and staff safety. Most focused on meeting the short-term and immediate needs of their members as quickly as possible and highlighted vital information that was being disseminated from state and federal sources to ensure their members were ready for the challenges ahead.

Figure 5. Covid-19 Pandemic Policy and Funding

Networks convened important stakeholders throughout the pandemic to discuss a "constantly shifting landscape" of regulations and advocacy priorities related to COVID-19 such as, "discriminatory hospital rationing policies, getting PPE and vaccines to individuals using home and community-based long term care, [and addressing] vaccine hesitancy." One interviewee explained that "we held a training specific to vaccines so that direct service professionals could attend and ask questions as well as provide more information on the vaccine." Some networks also began doing more advocacy work to ensure that their member organizations had the supplies they needed to provide services and priority access to vaccines.

Though networks have been operating without a blueprint or without "best practices" to lean on, the sector's response to the COVID-19 pandemic highlights human service networks' unique convening role and ability to effectively reach vulnerable communities. Statewide networks will be critical as human service organizations continue to navigate the health and human service consequences of COVID-19.

Challenges & Opportunities

Qualitative interview data and survey analysis identified two major challenges faced by human service networks that hinder their ability to optimize their role within the sector.

Network Funding

Many of the networks depended heavily on membership dues and revenue-generating activities such as training and consulting services. Network leaders were conscious of the need to assure that dues translated into a visible valuable benefit for member organizations. As such, these networks balanced engaging in high impact efforts that reach their diverse communities while also ensuring their own financial sustainability. Some networks expressed a tension between attending to important policy work and offering revenue generating programming. When reflecting on previous financial challenges in their network, an interviewee explained:

"They were doing programming….strategic planning, programming, board training, governance, programming for fees. Financially, it wasn't sustainable because if everything was a fee for a project and you were covering the operation of the organization. Everything was a grant for a specific project and you could never build in enough money to just run the business. So, that's what had happened as membership had just dwindled."

— INTERVIEWEE

Many interviewees expressed frustration about the absence of philanthropic support, with one participant remarking, "funding…everywhere is a battle for money and an aging donor base… you have pockets of money concentrated in a small number of people. Your philanthropy community is a very finite group of people." Several networks discussed their attempts to educate funders about the importance of advocacy but met resistance. An interviewee stated, "they've got to start funding advocacy. They've got to. That's the one thing that the government can't fund." Issues of funding are further complicated as many networks are perceived to be in direct competition for limited dollars with the human service providers they represent.

Balancing the needs of different members

In addition to sector and community level challenges (insufficient resources, human resources, etc.), networks confront their own operational and organizational challenges. Networks balance the diverse needs and identities of their members, often with sharp urban and rural divides. Sometimes rural areas lacked resources and connection to urban areas and tensions between different regions influenced members' perceptions of the services provided by the statewide network. One interviewee stated:

"It's really, really hard to please everyone. You can't please everyone. When you have as many service areas in a coalition as we do, you really have to focus on things that affect everyone.

— INTERVIEWEE

Members from different regions within each state sometimes perceived a competition for resources. Statewide networks addressed this by building bridges between organizations, providing opportunities to interact through conferences and virtual programming to help them recognize that urban and rural communities, for example, have many similar issues. They also faced the challenge of determining advocacy priorities — trying to find those common threads that affect all stakeholders given their diverse membership base.

Addressing Historic Inequalities

When communities across the United States flooded the streets in the summer of 2020 in protest of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police, the country began to publicly grapple with a second pandemic: historic and persistent racial inequity and injustice. Godsil and Waldeck (*2021*) delineated that while racial injustice has permeated the American experience, the summer of 2020 provided a "narrow window" of social actions, including advocacy and policy making in communities, business, and within the human service and nonprofit sectors.

While still in the early months of navigating the internal and external pressures of COVID-19, more than three-quarters (77%) of human service networks surveyed in this study reported adjustments to their organizational policies and practices that were influenced by the Black Lives Matter movement. With COVID-19 already re-shaping statewide human service network's focus and capacity, the additional focus on racial justice led to an expanded consideration of internal structures, policies, and priorities. This inward focus was particularly acute given racial and ethnic differences between network leadership and management and the staff and communities served by human service organizations. As one CEO stated, "the Human Services sector is being forced to confront the fact that the sector is composed of primarily white CEOs, but the folks on the front lines providing direct services are predominantly women of color."

Statewide human service networks' responses to the racial reckoning that arose in the summer of 2020 were most commonly focused around key areas of awareness and action.

Awareness

Human service network leaders highlighted increased attention to racial disparities in particular sectors (e.g., healthcare) at the state and local levels, as well as the role of funding (both philanthropic and from other sources) in inadvertently exacerbating racial disparities and undermining the intended impact of sector organizations. This awareness mirrored broader conversations around the dual pandemics of racial injustice and health inequity (*Evans, 2020*) and efforts to decolonize philanthropy (*Salomon, Potapchuk & Villarosa, 2014*). One interviewee discussed their efforts to connect with broader social movements while concurrently reaching out to smaller, often less resourced, hyper-local providers.

"[There is a] relationship between human service organizations and movements, and much smaller mutual aid networks, neighborhood associations, and faith-based kinds of communities…. So if we want to be on the right side of history, we need to talk about and work with these agencies who are…more justice focused."

— INTERVIEWEE

Networks raised awareness of the disproportionate burden that women, people of color, and women of color, in particular, face in the human service sector.

"Our workforce are predominantly women and individuals of color. We are fighting for them to have better pay. We are fighting for them to be recognized as the essential workforce that they are. What we always say is that a budget is a statement of priorities, right? And so you're prioritizing where to spend your money in a given year. And if you are choosing to cut funding from not just the workforce that, you know, are women and predominantly individuals of color, but also serving predominantly women to do visuals of color, you know, you are saying something with that budget."

— INTERVIEWEE

Alongside these systemic revelations, leaders of statewide human service networks made adjustments within their member organizations as well, with new or renewed attention to internal dialogues, conversations, and training related to race, racism, and cultural competence.

Actions

Through interviews and surveys, network leaders highlighted several steps they were taking in response to the political moment. Leaders focused on shifting their internal processes and systems, decision making structures, and resources. Some reviewed and revised internal and external organizational materials ranging from their policies, bylaws, strategic plans, and mission statements to center or, at least, include racial justice. Other networks worked to improve pay and hiring practices or advocated for better and more equitable pay for staff who are predominantly women and people of color. Networks also strategized ways to expand their reach and momentum for the future of their member organizations and the sector. Some networks created or strengthened equity task forces and their role in shaping internal policies and practices. Others developed and shared resources with members, especially Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) training opportunities. While all of these efforts to learn and act are an important and necessary result of recent racial justice movements, this work is really just beginning. Several networks suggested that "the conversations changed" and that this current moment has "given us permission to talk about it [racial justice]," but that what people are looking for most of all is more action.

Interview data identified barriers to the implementation of racial justice practices and policies within human service networks. An interviewee expressed frustration about the lack of philanthropic support for Black-led organizations, stating that insufficient funding for capacity building in many of these community-based, Black-led groups has made it impossible for them to thrive as part of the larger human service community.

Some statewide human service networks expressed concerns over their capacity to enact programming, training, or even participate in advocacy work with a racial justice lens. Additionally, some organizations expressed concern over displaying signage indicating support of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

"These topics… with the political environment (are) really polarizing….I know that…everybody's afraid to even talk about anything that it's going to create…explosions…(on) social media. You don't want to tiptoe around these issues either, but it's trying to figure out where we can be most effective and where we should be lending our voice with what our members think. We're not leaders in those fields, for sure. We are trying to figure (it) out."

— INTERVIEWEE

Networks discussed alternative methods to address racial justice through an expanded lens of social justice. Some networks identified racial issues more broadly in terms of their fit within economic justice. Some communities perceived an equity lens as less politically reactive than a racial justice lens. Many of these modifications to calls for racial justice fell within states with more conservative leadership.

Conclusion

Statewide networks, with their diverse representation and multiple roles, function as a nexus for community-based organizations and promote defragmentation within the social service sector. 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. Our research illuminated these broad functions: visibility, connecting stakeholders, brokering, and infrastructure in waiting. These roles were consistent in most states, however, unique conditions exist in each state including: political and social climate, poverty, Medicaid expansion status, and the history, scale, and scope of the human service sector. Unique challenges in each state were also illuminated. Some statewide networks had less relevance because human service providers identified more regionally. This was particularly true in larger states. Also, networks operating in states without Medicaid expansion status had to dedicate the majority of their energies on preserving resources instead of addressing emerging or expanded needs.

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. The role and function of these organizations is an underdeveloped area of research. Future studies on the strategies and tactics utilized by networks would advance the development of best practices within these organizations.

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