



Human services 2020

Human services in 2020 are customized, data-driven, and technology-infused, continually redefined by new possibilities. Governments tap community assets and peer-to-peer support programs to augment service delivery. Behavioral psychology and economics play a larger role in designing interventions, while outcome-oriented social innovation financing helps scale the programs that work.

Mobile technology, sensors, and wearable devices enable remote monitoring while virtual check-ins complement in-person interactions. A new breed of caseworker-intrapreneur brings fresh ideas and innovation to human services organizations. Outcome-based funding moves beyond fringe status thanks to advances in measurement, data analytics, and large inflows of private and nonprofit funding.

Calling on community to augment service delivery

Peer-to-peer social support

Human services agencies reinvent themselves by taking full advantage of the growing social services ecosystem. Peer-to-peer programs that use a co-design approach to service delivery become more commonplace. The fact that peer-to-peer programs balance agency support with client choice and freedom, while also strengthening social networks, drives this trend.

The Australian Center for Social Innovation (TACSI) has developed a social solution called Family by Family to tackle the problem of chaotic/stressed families. The program brings together thriving families and ones that are struggling to evolve a peer-to-peer support and learning system.

Community-powered human service delivery

Government agencies augment their capabilities by tapping community assets including citizens, NGOs, and community organizations. Community support becomes a powerful force, particularly in cases where heavy intervention is unnecessary. Problems such as loneliness and social isolation, for instance, can become mental health and substance abuse issues if left untreated; strong social networks can prevent this progression. Volunteers help strengthen the social safety net through the growth of innovative avenues—time banks such as CareBank, food sharing networks such as Casserole Club, and programs that engage communities such as the Philadelphia Department of Human Services’ Improving Outcomes for Children. Such programs reinforce feelings of responsibility and empowerment within the community. Mobile technology helps mobilize support.

Casserole Club in the UK helps people share extra portions of home-cooked food with others in the area who are not always able to cook themselves.

Meet the caseworker of the future: Smart, connected, intrapreneurial

Virtual training for caseworkers

Simulation-based training plays an important role in preparing employees to handle difficult situations they may encounter on the job. Serious “games” such as those developed by the Center for Child Protection at the University of Kent provide a safe medium for professionals to explore and assess child protection situations. Artificial intelligence-based training programs simulate a range of realistic scenarios for human services professionals at all stages of their careers.

The Center for Child Protection at the University of Kent has developed Serious Games—a child protection simulation—that helps train child protection professionals on how to handle various situations. The prototypes ‘Rosie 1’ and ‘Rosie 2’ help hone skills on various critical steps in the child protection process.

The rise of the connected caseworker

Human services agencies use technology to break down bureaucratic silos without the pain and expense of reorganizing. Through the use of mobile technology, cloud servers, and customized social media networks such as Patchwork, caseworkers connect with other professionals to share information, coordinate services, plan tactics, and remain updated on client progress.

Patchwork is a web-based tool that connects different human services professionals working with the same client. This allows caseworkers to share information securely and develop unified strategies around their clients.

Caseworker-intrapreneurs

Human services workers function as intrapreneurs, bringing new ideas to the organization and assuming responsibility for implementing them. These intrapreneurs receive increased support from their agencies, often through novel means such as internal platforms that allow innovators to post new ideas and solicit pledges of support from other internal entities. These pledges include in-kind contributions, such as staff time or assistance with testing, or more conventional resources such as the use of space or funding.

Help is just a click away: Remote monitoring

Virtual check-ins

As mobile technology grows ever more ubiquitous, mobile platforms allow caseworkers to conduct virtual check-ins with clients through free tools such as Facetime and other video and live-chat applications, supplementing in-person visits. These tools enable virtual monitoring and more timely intervention.

Zach Rosenthal an assistant professor with Duke University has developed a virtual reality simulator to help drug addicts develop coping strategies. The program is jointly funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) and the Department of Defense.

The avatar will see you now

In 2020, human services integrate virtual tools into service delivery. Virtual counseling and therapy (where live professionals are replaced by avatars) supplements conventional in-person therapy. Virtual reality is used to treat addiction, substance abuse, and smoking; by reacting to cues in a virtual environment, patients can build coping mechanisms that kick in when they encounter similar situations in real life. Virtual methods complement in-person interactions, but do not replace them.

Wearable devices prevent substance abuse

Wearable mobile health devices detect changes in indicators such as body motions, skin temperature, and heart rate, and can predict when the wearer is likely to engage in risky behaviors. These indicators are wirelessly streamed to a smartphone equipped with an app that monitors them, delivering personalized, multimedia drug prevention interventions in real time and alerting caseworkers when in-person intervention is required.

iHeal, a wrist-worn sensor, tracks indicators of arousal or stress in drug addicts. It measures the skin's electrical activity, body motion, skin temperature, and heart rate, and wirelessly transmits the information to a mobile app. The app can deliver personalized drug prevention intervention to the user. (NIDA) and Department of Defense.

Smart homes for seniors

Sensor-equipped “smart homes” improve long-term care options for senior citizens, allowing them to live safely in their homes and maintain their independence. These homes recognize and analyze behavior patterns (eating, sleeping, and movement) and report signs of illness or cognitive degeneration to caretakers and physicians. Compared to the high cost of other long-term care options, sensor-enabled smart homes are affordable. For the rising population of senior citizens across the globe, sensors improve their quality of life while reducing the total cost of their long-term care.

By 2020, the market for continuous glucose monitoring devices aided by wearable sensor technology reaches \$500 million.

“Made-to-measure” human services: Customized service design and delivery

Customer-centric human services

Rather than asking, “How many services or benefits can I enroll this person in?” caseworkers instead ask, “What is the goal for this individual or family, and which services and benefits would help them achieve it?” Rather than a one-size-fits-all standard, caseworkers strive to understand individual needs, and then provide the services and benefits most likely to help their unique situations. By segmenting the larger customer population into sub-groups with similar characteristics, safety-net programs are tailored to the unique needs of each group, resulting in better outcomes.

Behavioral nudges in human services

Recent strides in behavioral psychology and economics lead to the widespread use of techniques that coax clients to alter their behaviors. These “nudges,” actions used to help improve decision-making, are effective in spurring positive behavioral change without substantial investments.

Agencies such as the Texas Attorney General's Child Support Division already use simple tweaks to collection notices—such as removing the logo of the attorney general and simplifying the language used—to improve collections.

Data to the rescue: Targeted, analytics-driven interventions

Geospatial analytics and hot-spotting

Administrators use geospatial analysis to examine complex data through the lens of place, giving them an intuitive way to make sense of the situation. Organizations such as Fostering Court Improvement use state and local data to map child abuse and neglect “hot spots”—neighborhoods where instances of child mistreatment are especially prevalent. This allows child welfare workers, judges, and others to ask meaningful questions about factors that might be feeding higher rates of abuse, and to focus resources on the neighborhoods—or even particular housing developments—where they are needed most.

Jeffery Brenner, MD, used the hot-spotting technique in Camden (NJ) to identify “high utilizers” of city medical services. By coordinating medical and social services for these high-cost patients, Brenner and his team were able to almost halve the cost in some cases.

Customer analytics change lives

Rather than tracking and measuring transactions as a means of measuring success (Did we respond to 95 percent of our referrals within five days?), human services agencies instead gauge the impact of their services on their customers’ lives and futures. With customer analytics, agencies mine their enormous pools of data to better understand and predict client needs, vastly improving the services they provide. By focusing on the demand side of the equation, the business of human services is better aligned to its core mission of improving people’s lives.

Washington State Department of Social and Health Service (DSHS) developed and maintains an integrated client data base (ICDB) of its 2.2 million clients. The department’s Research and Analysis Division (RDA) provides policy-driven analyses of government-funded social and health services with a focus on the outcomes of various programs.

Segmentation and intervention driven by lifetime liability

To better understand the factors and client characteristics driving benefit costs, governments assess the long-term liability of social program beneficiaries. This involves calculating the potential lifetime liability of every individual on welfare, breaking them down by customer segments/cohorts, and targeting interventions accordingly, with annual re-evaluations.

Focus on outcomes, not outputs

Social innovation financing: Testing new approaches and scaling what works

Tight government budgets and growing demand for services drive the growth of social innovation financing through instruments such as social impact bonds. Through this vehicle, government pays not for legislatively mandated strategies, with their attendant red tape and uncertainty, but for results. The path to the goal is left to the service provider, which shoulders the details and the risks. The bonds guarantee long-term funding, a frequent stumbling block for nonprofits, while the risk is shared among government (which pays for the outcome), investors (who put up money to achieve the outcome), and providers (who deliver the outcome). Focusing on results opens social services to new providers, approaches, business models, and investors.

Putting the proof before the program

Large public databases and data mining techniques make possible measurements that were once impossible—or too expensive—to pursue. Researchers use administrative data collected for other purposes, such as student test scores, criminal arrest records, and healthcare expenditures, to conduct randomized control trials and establish what works. It becomes possible to understand which early interventions make the most difference, and which mix of services under what circumstances help individual clients.

Agencies such as the US Administration on Children and Families encourage agencies to shift resources from interventions proven to have little impact—generic parenting classes or counseling, for instance—to those that genuinely improve behavior and emotional health.

Measuring performance to make progress

Building on existing information systems, agencies create dashboards that allow executives to see where their departments stand on each performance measure, and more importantly to monitor their workers' progress toward improving results. Caseworkers use a dashboard that shows the specific actions needed in particular cases to improve performance and advance agency goals.

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Interviews

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