# The Non-profit Human Services Sector: A Brief Primer

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# Introduction

## Overview

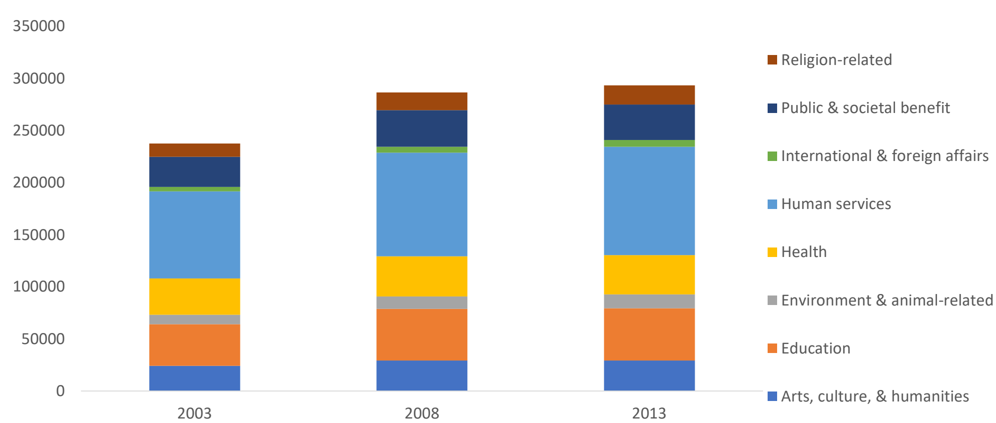
In the US, the non-profit human service sector (simply "the human service sector", hereafter) plays critical roles in the daily lives of millions of Americans and their communities. Human service organizations "...feed the hungry, provide housing to the homeless, provide job training and placement to unemployed individuals, assist crime victims and offenders, act as advocates for children, help people prepare for and recover from disasters, and offer numerous other programs and services to assist individuals, especially the needy ones, in their daily lives" (*Atouba, 2014; Boris et al, 2010*). Indeed, few sectors of the US economy are as fundamental or versatile. While the sector faces substantial challenges, particularly with respect to funding, it is no stranger to resource uncertainty and has demonstrated impressive resilience in the face of multiple challenges over the past several decades. Although human services are delivered by public and by private non-profit and for-profit entities, the non-profit segment is the largest of the human services delivery mechanisms and faces particular current and future challenges that are the focus of this paper. Whether non-profit human services can navigate through evolving fiscal, structural and other threats will depend, as it always has, on the sector's ability "... to break from tradition and be enterprising, innovative, collaborative, and quick ... [and] to be ever more dynamic in how they interact with their clients" (*Carey, Hollingsworth, & Reed, 2014*; see also *Morris et al, 2018*). Additionally, a better future depends upon greater public understanding of — and support for — this critical sector (*Morris et al, 2018*).

## Basic characteristics of the non-profit human service sector

The human service sector constitutes a subcategory of nonprofit organizations under the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE), the classification system for nonprofit organizations developed by the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS) at the Urban Institute and used by the Internal Revenue Service. In terms of the number of unique organizations, in 2013 (the most recent year for which comprehensive data is available), the human service sector accounted for the single largest proportion (35.5%) of the non-profit sector, specifically 501(c)(3) organizations, or public charities (*McKeever, Dietz, & Fyffe, 2016*).

### TABLE 1:

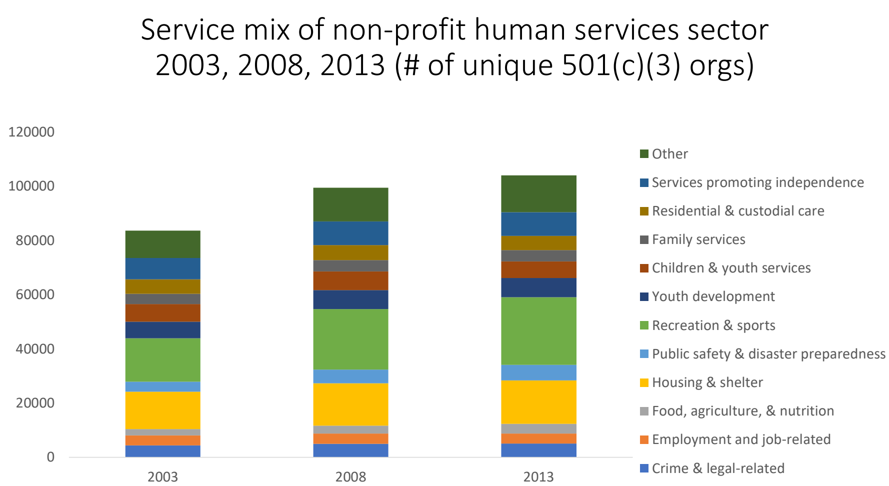
Size of non-profit human services sector relative to other non-profit sectors
2003, 2008, 2013 (# of unique 501(c)(3) orgs)




Source: McKeever, Dietz, & Fyfe, 2016

Between 2003 and 2013 (the most recent 10-year range for which comprehensive data is available), the human service sector grew by 24 percent in terms of the number of unique organizations that had registered with the Internal Revenue Service under section 501(c)3 (**Table 1:** N2003 = 83,644 to N2013 = 104,004) (*Ibid*). As noted in **Table 2**, the largest three subsectors within human services in 2013 were, respectively, recreation and sports (N = 24,950 organizations), housing and shelter (N = 15,978), and youth development (N = 7061) (*Ibid*). The sub-sectors with the strongest growth, in relative terms, between 2003 and 2013, included: food, agriculture, and nutrition (2,288 to 3,615; +58%); public safety and disaster preparedness (3,661 to 5,744; +57%); recreation and sport (16,081 to 24,950; +55%) (*Ibid*). The sub-sectors with the weakest growth, in relative terms, between 2003 and 2013, included: children and youth services (6,537 to 6,165; -6%); residential and custodial care (5,397 to 5,219; -3%); employment and job-related (3,739 to 3,725; -0.4%) (*Ibid*).

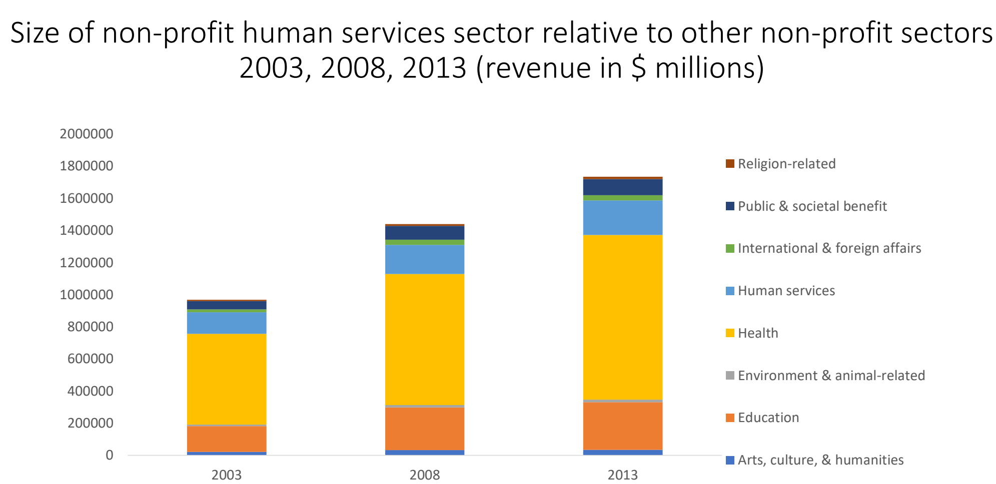
## TABLE 2:




Source: McKeever, Dietz, & Fyfe, 2016

In contrast to its relatively large number of unique organizations, the human services sector accounted for only about 14% of the revenue within the non-profit sector in 2013 (See **Table 3**).

## TABLE 3:

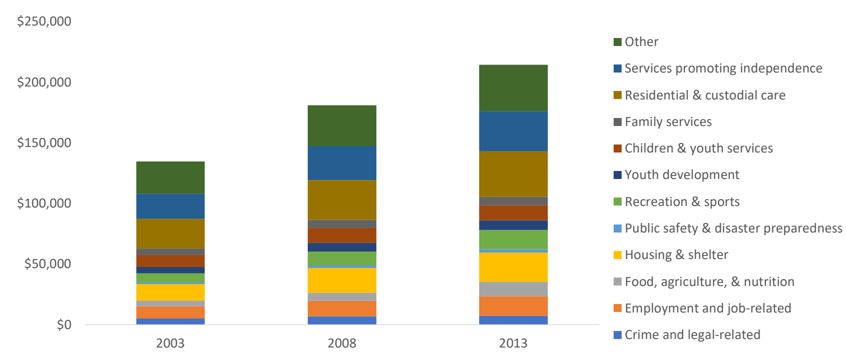



Source: McKeever, Dietz, & Fyfe, 2016

Between 2003 and 2013, the revenue generated by the human service sector grew by 26% after adjusting for inflation ($135B to $214B; See **Table 3**), slightly outpacing the growth rate of the overall non-profit sector (*Ibid*). Within the sector, as noted in **Table 4**, residential and custodial care ($37.4B), services promoting independence ($32.9B), and housing and shelter supports ($24.2B) represented the largest specific sub-sectors in 2013 (*Ibid*). The sub-sectors with the strongest growth, in relative terms, between 2003 and 2013, included: food, agriculture, and nutrition ($4.8B to $12B; +151%); recreation and sport ($7.6B to $16B; +113%); public safety and disaster preparedness ($1.3B to $2.5B; +94%) (*Ibid*). The sub-sectors with the weakest growth, in relative terms, between 2003 and 2013, included: children and youth services ($9.9B to $12.5B; +27%); family services ($5.2B to $7B; +33%); crime and legal-related ($5.2B to $7.4B; + 42.1%) (*Ibid*).

## TABLE 4:

Service mix of non-profit human services sector
2003, 2008, 2013 (revenue in $ millions)




Source: McKeever, Dietz, & Fyfe, 2016

As noted in **Table 5**, in 2013, fees for services and goods from both public and private sources accounted for 53% of human services revenue, making the human services sector the third-most dependent on fees, behind health and education, among all non-profit sub-sectors (*Ibid*). Contributions from individuals, foundations, and corporations accounted for 21% of revenue (*Ibid*). Grants from the government accounted for 21% of revenue, making the human service sector the most reliant on government grants, among all non-profit sectors (*Ibid*).

## TABLE 5:

Funding sources of non-profit human services sector, 2013


Primary source: McKeever, Dietz, & Fyfe, 2016

# A Brief History

In the US, the practice of creating voluntary associations to address emerging social and human problems in the absence of government intervention predates the American Revolution (*Norris-Tirrell, 2014*). Throughout its history, the evolving human services sector has exhibited impressive resilience, adapting to changing demands and expectations as a consequence of disease, war, economic swings, natural disasters, and changing understanding of effective interventions for vulnerable individuals (*Ibid; Morris et al, 2018*). Up until the early 19th century, the sector was mostly comprised of small agencies which grew out of the “Settlement House Movement”; it did not enjoy the legal and tax-related benefits to the degree that the sector does today (*Ibid, citing Hall, 2010*). Moreover, for most of its history, funding of human services came predominantly from private donations (*Ibid, citing Gronjberg, 2001*).

In fact, it was not until the mid-20th century that government support of the human services sector began to grow substantially. President Eisenhower formally initiated government contracting with the private sector, including nonprofit organizations. Both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson followed his lead with considerable expansion of sector support under *The Public Assistance Amendments of 1962 and 1967* and *The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964* (*Ibid, citing Van Slyke, 2002*). By the late 1970s, government represented the single largest source of funding for human services and, as a result, ushered in substantial structural change within the sector: this resulted in “…the transition from the small, volunteer-driven nonprofit to the professionally managed, single-focused organization, often with little dependence on volunteers or donations.” (*Ibid. p308*)

Increasing national government roles in health and human services, economic support, and civil rights protections during this period prompted conservative backlash as the oil crisis and other fiscal challenges and political discord expanded. Some saw a federal government which had grown “…outsized in its influence on Americans,” (*Never, 2016, p 190*), “…had stifled private initiative” (*Hall, 2016, p 95*), and needed a “…fundamental reordering of priorities” (*Never, 2016, p 190*). In 1981, catalyzed by Ronald Reagan’s ascendency to the US presidency and the first Republican majority in the US senate in nearly 30 years, an era of conservative social policy began that would eventually become known as “The Reagan Revolution”. The policy agenda was characterized by an emphasis “…on devolution (shifting responsibilities to states and localities) and privatization (shifting responsibilities for service provision to private sector actors)” (*Hall, 2016, p 95-96*). Among other things, these shifts were premised on the argument that “…more local and private service provision would not only be more flexible and responsive to the needs of beneficiaries, but also that competition for contracts among private providers would produce greater efficiency and effectiveness in service provision” (*Ibid, 2016, p 95-96, citing Olasky, 1992*). Through the 1980s and into 1990s, federal spending to the human service sector was cut by as much as 25% (*Norris-Tirrell, 2014 citing Salamon, 2012*).

Entering the 1990s, a down-sized federal government placed high priority on human service organizational agility and responsiveness to citizens’ needs (*Never, 2016, p 191, citing Osborne & Gaebler, 1992*). While the Clinton Administration revived some federal support for the sector, access to funding was increasingly competitive and often accompanied by burdensome administrative conditions (*Norris-Tirrel, 2014, p 309*). Meanwhile, political conservatives continued to push an expanded devolution agenda (*Hall, 2016, p 96*). As a result, this period was characterized by movement toward greater third-party service provision, expanded accountability for both government and its contractors, and enhancement of consumer choice (*Never, 2016, p 191*). For the nonprofit human services sector, in particular, these trends translated to an increasingly contracted, rather than grant-funded, revenue landscape which was characterized by limited latitude as to how services could be produced, increased expectations of demonstrable performance, and growing competition with the private for-profit sector for contracts and customers (*Ibid*). For the typical non-profit human services organization operating with constrained resources and a lack of expertise in the technical aspects of contract development and administration, third-party billing, program evaluation, and marketing, the challenges were significant (*Ibid*).

Entering the 21st century, “nonprofits found themselves grappling with increasing responsibility of providing social services formerly borne by the very governments on which they were now heavily dependent for revenue and the need to become more commercial and entrepreneurial in their operations in order to survive” (*Hall, 2016*). The Great Recession between 2007 and 2009 exacerbated the challenges of this dynamic. For both non-profit and for-profit service organizations funded primarily by contracts from state governments (which unlike the federal government cannot run budget deficits) significant economic contractions translated to delays in payment for services rendered and, ultimately, decreased resources for future contracts. For human service organizations, survival during this difficult period meant freezing or reducing salaries, drawing on cash reserves, and/or laying off employees (*Boris, de Leon, Roger, & Nikolova, 2010*), especially for those organizations unable to “cross-subsidize the provision of services, with those services not fully covered by contracts being subsidized by other revenue streams such as individual donations” (*Never, 2016, p 192*).

Although the *American Reinvestment Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009*, commonly known as the federal stimulus bill, provided a substantial lifeline for many human service organizations, the effects of the Great Recession linger today, as discussed in the next section.

# Features of External Content

The ability of the non-profit human service sector to survive and thrive in the 21st century inter-depends on multiple population, economic, and political trends that continue to shape which and how societal resources — public and private alike — are distributed. Several of these trends are briefly discussed below.

*“The only constant is change”*

*— Heraclitus, circa 500 BCE*

## The US is getting older and more racially and ethnically diverse.

Between 2020 and 2060, in absolute terms, the total population of elderly adults (i.e., age 65 or older) is expected to increase by 69%, compared to just 12% among children under the age of 18 and non-elderly adults combined. This translates to a marked net increase in the “total dependency ratio”, an indicator used by the US Census Bureau to approximate the potential burden of the dependent population (i.e. those typically not in the labor force) on a society’s resources (*Vespa & Armstrong, 2018*). Additionally, as early as 2045, it is expected that the share of the population that self-identifies as non-Hispanic White will no longer be in the majority (*Ibid*). Thus, the US will soon become a “majority-minority” nation and have a “plurality” of racial and ethnic groups. (*Ibid*) It is thought that each of these phenomena will be driven primarily by immigration from Latin America and Asia, and the demographic composition thereof (*Ibid*).

## The “traditional” American family is a thing of the past.

Compared to 1960, the height of the post-World War II “Baby Boom” when two-parent, “married, male breadwinner” families dominated the work-living arrangements of children under the age of 15 (*Cohen, 2014*), the 21st century has been characterized by greater family structure diversity and evolving gender roles (*Pew, 2013; Pew, 2015*). Indeed, for a variety of reasons, including and especially the steady decline in the prevalence of marriage over the last half century (*Pew, 2014a*), the share of children under the age of 18 living with two married parents declined from 87% in 1960 to 62% in 2014 (*Pew, 2015*). Over the same period, the share of children under the age of 18 living with single parent or cohabiting parents more than tripled from 9% to 33% (*Ibid*). Relatedly, mothers are now far more likely than in the mid to late 20th century to participate in the labor force (39% in 1975 vs. 64% in 2015 for mothers of children under the age of 6 (*Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015*) and earn all or the majority of their households' income (11% in 1960 vs. 40% in 2012 for households with children under the age of 18 (*US Census Bureau, 2012*).

## Socioeconomic inequality in the US has increased, and it is likely to get even worse.

Although federal anti-poverty policies and programs emanating from the Johnson administration's "War on Poverty" demonstrably benefited the most socioeconomically disadvantaged Americans over the last several decades (*Wimer et al., 2013*), US policies over this same period of time have failed to mitigate the dramatic growth in inequality between "the rich and the rest". Since 1980, on average, the annual income of the top 1% has grown by 205%, while the wages of the bottom 50% have stagnated, after adjusting for inflation and before taking into account taxes and transfers (*World Inequality Lab, 2017*). According to economists Thomas Picketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman (2017), the explanation for this trend is "... a perfect storm of radical policy changes since the 1970s, including, but not limited to, a decreasingly progressive tax system, a collapsing federal minimum wage, weakening unions, and increasingly unequal access to higher education.

Moreover, Picketty et al. argue that the Trump Administration's recent reform of the federal tax code "will not only reinforce this trend, it will turbocharge inequality in America," primarily given the disproportionate benefits that it is likely to confer to those in the upper echelons of the socioeconomic strata. Economists Darrick Hamilton and Michael Linden (2018) have argued further that beyond exacerbating wealth inequality in the US in general, the Trump Administration's tax bill will also exacerbate gaps in wealth and, by extension, opportunity along racial and ethnic lines. As Katrina vanden Huevel (2018) summarizes, "while the richest Americans reap the benefits of the law, many workers at the bottom of the income ladder, where people of color are overrepresented, will actually see an overall tax increase over time. That means the law effectively raids black and brown Americans' paychecks to fatten the investment accounts of the largely white financial elite."

## There is an on-going revolution in technology, communication, and consumerism, and in turn, the personalization, efficiency, and convenience that the population has come to enjoy and expect from the products and services it consumes.

Increasingly, organizations — irrespective of the sector — operate within a "learning economy" (*Morel, Palier, and Palme, 2009*) characterized by a high rate of change with respect to the requirements of organizations' capabilities and, relatedly, workers' competencies. Human services organizations can no longer "... focus only on the delivery of existing programs and contracts: dynamism and constant connectivity are required. The way individuals and organizations interact with services is fundamental to how human services need to be designed and managed." (*Carey, Hollingsworth, & Reed, 2014, 71*). "Open innovation" (*Chesbrough, 2005*) through external collaborations that leverage the power of shared resources (e.g., financial, human, and technological capital) has long been embraced as a strategic adaptation to this climate within the for-profit sector. However, the organizations that comprise the non-profit sector generally, and the human services sector more particularly, have historically been much less agile in this regard.

## The funding landscape is increasingly uncertain.

In the wake of the Great Recession, unprecedented debt burdens at the federal, state, and local levels have catalyzed an on-going debate concerning the extent to which and how government should be involved in the delivery and payment of educational, healthcare, and human services. In turn, the citizenry-at-large has applied increasing pressure on legislators to ensure that whatever public funds are distributed to pay for these services are utilized as efficiently as possible to help those most in need. One resulting burden on service agencies has been the expectation that they minimize their relative administrative overhead versus care delivery expenditures (*Never, 2016*). This environment creates a paradox: for nonprofit human service organizations to survive and thrive in an increasingly dynamic and complex resource environment, they need to be able to successfully compete for contracts and customers and develop effective programming with demonstrable returns on investment. These efforts require substantial investments in administrative infrastructure, including improved technology and strategic managerial expertise.

Success in getting public funding traditionally conferred some measure of organizational legitimacy and financial stability. However, as reported recently by Morris et al (2018), although government contracts provide the human service sector with a disproportionate share of its revenue, these funds often don't fully cover either direct or indirect costs; accounts receivable cycles are often behind schedule or otherwise unpredictable; and onerous reporting requirements and strict allocation restrictions have expanded. It is not surprising, therefore, that nearly 13% of human service organizations are "technically insolvent" (i.e. they have liabilities that exceed their assets), 30% have cash reserves that cover less than one month of expenses, and roughly half reported a negative operating margin over the past three years (*Ibid*). Directionally, these observations appear likely to get worse before they get better, particularly given that the recent tax bill is "expected to reduce charitable giving to nonprofits by as much as $13.1 billion per year and deep cuts to federal social services programs are favored by the White House" (*Ibid*).

In the face of expanding fiscal uncertainty, human services organizations have turned to private sector philanthropy for additional resources and collaboration. However, foundations and other philanthropic organizations continued to feel the effects of the recent recession well after recovery began, and, for the most part, have not seen charitable giving return to its pre-recession level. (*Carey et al, 2014*). Additionally, as private foundations have had to be more selective in grant-making, they have also increased accountability and performance requirements for human service and other organizations, often mirroring the increased obligations from public funders (*Ibid*).

# Opportunities and Imperatives

The challenges that the human service sector faces today are not especially dissimilar from those that the sector has consistently faced to varying degrees since the 1980s. Indeed, the sector has for decades had to navigate its way through changes in the demographic and socioeconomic composition of the population and — in turn — shifting service demands, inadequate and unstable funding mechanisms, and increases in "strings attached" to available funding. Are the challenges more severe today? Perhaps. However, in principle, it is not necessarily any more true today than it was in the past thirty years that, in order to sustainably achieve their missions, human service organizations must "be enterprising, innovative, collaborative, and quick [and] ... ever more dynamic in how they interact with their clients" (*Carey, Hollingsworth, & Reed, 2014*). These are precarious times to be sure, but strategic adaptations are underway, and recent sector related publications suggest that where challenges arise, so too does opportunity (*Morris et al, 2018*). Among the many examples are the ways in which the health sector, in part responsible for some of the crowd-out of available resources for the human services sector, now sees the sector as a potentially critical partner in addressing the social determinants of health that drive negative health outcomes and costs (*Fraze et al, 2016; Raday et al, 2018; and van Beek et al, 2018*).

## Innovation

In the face of funding uncertainty, it has become increasingly necessary for non-profits to diversify their revenue base. For some, this has included service diversification and strategic organizational affiliations, including mergers and acquisitions. Additionally, the adoption of commercial, or "social enterprise", strategies have grown in prevalence, including client and member fees, product development and sales, and cause-related marketing relationships (*Norris-Tirrell, 2014*). Although there is an on-going and healthy debate as to whether the potential benefits that have been realized are worth the potential risks, particularly in terms of "mission drift" (see, e.g., *Smith et al. 2012; Bielefield, 2009; Guo, 2006*), experimentation with new approaches to strategically acquiring and maintaining the resources necessary to survive in uncertain times is a defining mark of industrial progress, and should be viewed as an opportunity (perhaps a necessity) in times like these.

## Collaboration

Another example is the emergence of new organizational forms out of the for-profit sector (e.g., "social impact enterprises" in the form of B Corporations, L3Cs, and other Flexible / Social Purpose Organizations) in response to the increasing expectation of key, particularly younger, consumer segments that the businesses they patronize are sensitive to "social justice" issues (*Norris-Tirrel, 2014*). Although this development has introduced a new competitor to the human service sector, an optimistic perspective is that these efforts also represent opportunities for collaboration and shared resources, including and especially knowledge, with a set of actors whose business acumen might be complementary to the more "on-the-ground", inter-personal, and community-relational expertise possessed by non-profit human service organizations that have been in the field for decades.

## Advocacy

The uncertainty of the public funding landscape represents an opportunity, rather than merely a challenge, to consider as a society the extent to which the public funding that is available has been appropriately targeted toward the human service providers and those communities with greatest need. Not all human service organizations are in dire straits. Some are stronger than others (e.g., better-resourced and/or better-managed), and — in turn — better able to adapt to uncertain times. Therefore, by definition, some need more support than others.

How well do human service organizations operating in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities — where human service organizations are more likely to be resource distressed (*Never, 2013 & 2016*) — compete for grants and contracts? To what extent might this sub-set of the human service sector require additional support (and what kind of support)? The answers to these questions represent a challenge (i.e. what to do next) for which near-term solutions may be inadequate. They also represent an opportunity to focus attention and marshal resources toward components of the sector most in need of capacity-building through targeted investments in human and technological capital to enable better program creation and evaluation, as well as the financial control systems necessary to sustain operations (*Morris et al., 2018*). In this regard, the rise of the "Millennial" generation as innovators and leaders of the American economy represents reason for optimism according to Pew Research Center (*2014b*).

Millennials distinguish themselves from older adults in a variety of ways. They tend to be more racially diverse, politically and religiously independent, and socially progressive. Currently, Millennials are more likely than older adults to be burdened by higher levels of student loan debt, poverty, and unemployment, as well as lower levels of wealth and personal income. Nonetheless, compared to older adults, Millennials are uniquely concerned with "social justice" issues, and may therefore be the human service sector's greatest advocates now and in the near future (*Never, 2016*). Indeed, Millenials are likely to "... rewrite the social contract with government, which may include a greater place for policies that support the most disadvantaged in society," (*Ibid, p 196*) and — by extension — a potentially more abundant and stable flow of resources for the human service sector.

## Conclusion

A strong human service sector is — and has always been — vital to American life, especially in times of greater resource uncertainty, such as the present. To survive and thrive, rather than wait around for the resource environment to change, sector leadership argues that human services can — and needs to — take responsibility for its own destiny. This means actively seeking out and engaging new service delivery strategies, technological innovations, and social enterprise and other revenue generating opportunities. Building partnerships and networks within and beyond the human services sector, as well as demonstrating more robust performance and risk management capabilities are crucial. In the end, however, these leaders believe that success requires a new public conversation about the intrinsic value of – and the need for investment in - the human service sector, both for the growing number of socioeconomically disadvantaged Americans and for the building of healthy communities (*National Human Services Assembly, 2018; Morris et al., 2018).*

In closing, to borrow from Never (2016), for decades, the human service sector has been like a "willow tree that bends in seemingly unbearable headwinds yet does not break." Through innovation, collaboration, advocacy, and investment, the human service sector is fully capable of living up to that metaphor for decades to come.

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