

Massachusetts Healthcare CEO: America's Crumbling Human Service Sector Will Cost Lives

By Christopher Tuttle, Bridgewell President and CEO

Each year in the United States, Americans take 178 million life-threatening trips over 46,154 structurally deficient bridges. The horrific shape of our nation's infrastructure is what compelled the Biden Administration and Congress to pass the \$65 billion Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal. The risk of injury or death was simply too much to bear, and the situation too dire to be ignored any longer. Locally, more than \$1.1 billion was allocated to address its infrastructure problems here in the Commonwealth.

Like our bridges, the human infrastructure of the human services industry has been neglected for decades. The consequences of that neglect are now more evident than ever – and the capacity for human services agencies to continue providing vital services to some of our most vulnerable citizens is on the verge of collapse.

As President and CEO of Bridgewell, a large human services organization that supports more than 6,000 residents of the Commonwealth each year, I have witnessed the adverse effects of inadequate funding for human services, resulting in staffing shortages and cuts to critically important programs that provide a safety net for thousands in need. To ensure existing human services agencies remain viable and prepared to effectively meet increasing needs, the Commonwealth must prioritize increasing funding now – not after the human services sector has collapsed under the weight of continued staffing shortages at a time when demand for services continues to increase.

This crisis is as life-threatening as the crumbling bridges in our country. According to the Providers' Council, the human services industry provides care to one in ten Massachusetts residents and supports over 180,000 jobs throughout the state. And the needs are great. For example, drug overdose deaths reached over 100,000 in our nation last year – and an estimated one in five U.S. adults suffer from mental illness, and 134 million people live in an area where mental health professionals are in short supply.

We currently have 284 unfilled positions at Bridgewell, including nursing roles, behavioral health clinical roles, and many direct care support positions. Sadly, this drastically impacts our ability to provide critical services to address unmet needs in the communities we serve. This staffing shortage has led to the closure of programs, significant growth of waitlists to access services, and the inability to open vital programs to address unmet or emerging needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought light to the issue, but this crisis has been brewing for decades. For years, human services providers like Bridgewell have called upon the Commonwealth to develop reimbursement rates that accurately reflect the costs of operating services, including the cost of paying our staff a living wage. We compete with companies like Amazon, McDonald's, and Target that are currently offering highly competitive wages to retain and recruit staff. Rather than pursuing careers in human services, applicants are choosing different career paths that offer greater potential to provide a decent standard of living for themselves and their families.

Over the years, my colleagues and I have provided testimony on the realities of operating safety net services for some of the most vulnerable citizens in the Commonwealth, including the true costs of providing these services. We often received a thank you from state leaders in response, but no significant changes have been made to the reimbursement rate, a measure critical to improving the outlook for agencies.

Despite a few recent steps taken by the Baker administration and the Commonwealth to address this problem, human services – such as behavioral health and disability assistance – have been neglected for

years. The human services crisis places millions of Americans in harm's way, just like the 178 million life-threatening trips made on unsafe bridges every year.

As with the nation's infrastructure challenges, financing to adequately fund our human services infrastructure must become a state and national priority.

The State of Massachusetts has a moral obligation to ensure that essential services are available to the most vulnerable in our communities, those who deserve quality services to help them reach their fullest potential. Human services organizations and the staff who power them save lives and strengthen communities. That is why it's crucial for our state and national leaders to adequately invest in the lives of their citizens and the communities they serve.

We implore the Biden administration and Congress to create a bipartisan plan to sufficiently fund our human services infrastructure, putting the health and wellbeing of those in need at the forefront. We also call upon the Commonwealth to add an additional \$351 million to the Chapter 257 Rate Reserve – increasing it from \$230,000,000 to \$581,000,000. Without these critical changes, human services organizations will struggle to survive and our human services infrastructure – a critical safety net for thousands in the Commonwealth and millions nationwide – will continue to crumble.

It's time to fight for critically needed human services and for those who provide them before it is too late.

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