



US human services: Lead with impact

Delivering better outcomes now and post-pandemic.



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Creating human services for the long run

Never have human services had a more vital role to play in people's lives.¹ The pandemic—and the measures to contain it—have intensified the strains on vulnerable groups in the US, especially the unemployed.

As of April 30, 2021, the US cumulatively had 32 million cases and 572,190 deaths from COVID-19.² In January 2021, the country's unemployment rate was 6.3%—up from 3.5% in February 2020. A March 2021 survey by the US Census Bureau found that more than 81 million American adults were struggling to pay for everyday expenses.³

The same survey found that over 24 million adults said their households sometimes or often lack enough food to eat.⁴ Such economic hardship helps to explain the 17% increase in the number of Americans on food stamps from February to August 2020.⁵

Human services agencies have been on the front line of the crisis, deploying critical services and handling an explosion in workload. While agencies' response has been extraordinary, the pandemic has exposed entrenched vulnerabilities in their organizational structures, delivery models and systems.

Human services in the US are funded and administered—often in partnership with private organizations—at the federal, state and local levels.⁶ Even in the best of times, navigating this can be daunting for recipients.

For example, a family might have to enroll in a disability program with a federal agency, sign up for food assistance with the state, and obtain childcare vouchers from a local government entity. The complexity is amplified for people with limited Internet access and those who find technology challenging.

Consider a nationwide survey conducted in April 2020, which

found that for every 10 people who had successfully filed for unemployment benefits during the previous four weeks, three additional people had applied unsuccessfully (because computer systems were overloaded) and two further eligible people had not bothered to apply at all.⁷ Continuing strain on agencies is particularly visible in areas like child welfare, where counselor meetings at schools, home visits and other crucial services have been greatly reduced.

What's clear is that legacy ways of working and delivering services won't stand up to future demands—and that these must be reinvented to meet society's changing needs and expectations.

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10

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Taking the pulse of US residents

As these challenges play out, what do benefit recipients think of the human services they're currently receiving?

In late 2020 we surveyed more than 7,000 people who had received support within the past two years and 600 executives currently leading human services, employment, public pension and child welfare agencies.

Respondents represent 10 countries—Australia, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States. This report draws lessons from the feedback of US-based participants.

What did we find?

Inevitably, citizens' perceptions varied from country to country. But whether responsible for formulating public policy, implementing it or both, agencies face daunting and rising challenges in helping get people back to work, keeping them safe and providing other types of vital support. In the US, more than a third (36%) of people expect to use more human services in the future, 12% higher than the global average.

The survey also found that while more than half of individuals surveyed (63%) said that the response of their social service agencies to the COVID-19 pandemic has been strong or very strong, most (89%) said they lack sufficient guidance on what services they are eligible to access. This posed a challenge for the more than half (56%) of respondents who have had significant new caregiving responsibilities at home during the crisis.

63%

said that the response of their social service agencies to the COVID-19 pandemic has been strong or very strong.

89%

said they lack sufficient guidance on what services they are eligible to access.

Our survey did find several bright spots to build on. For instance, US respondents were more likely to have had:

- **Services delivered to them virtually during the pandemic (29% of US respondents vs. 24% globally)**
- **Services closely tailored to their specific needs (50% vs. 44%)**
- **Services available as soon as they were needed (28% vs. 21%)**
- **Different services bundled together conveniently (18% vs. 11%)**



Agencies under strain

Not surprisingly, human services providers are feeling the strain. Most executives said the need to do things like create new digital offerings, handle soaring demand for digital services and respond quickly to policy changes pose big challenges for their agencies.

Worryingly, only 49% of executives globally rated their own organization as highly prepared for current and future challenges, down from 56% pre-pandemic. In the United States, this drop was even more pronounced (from 73% to 60%). Further, 74% of executives and 71% of US respondents agree or strongly agree that human services will look very different in the years ahead.

As agencies rethink how—and what—they offer, three priorities stand out.

77%

of US respondents expect human services to look very different in the years ahead.

74%

of US human services executives agree that this will be a turning point for their organizations.



Priority 01

Become more responsive

Agencies today face higher demand for their services, new technical hurdles (such as social distancing rules) and rising expectations for service quality. All these developments make it harder to deliver services quickly and effectively. Yet doing so will be vital in dealing with crises to come.

Singapore sets the pace.

Some of the more digitally advanced countries—notably Singapore—have made great strides in overcoming those challenges. Some 80% of Singaporean citizens we surveyed said since the onset of the pandemic, they had received a service in a new way, such as switching to virtual delivery—immediately available, personalized, available through new digital channels or bundled. Globally, just 59% of respondents said the same.

Others are also making headway.

Canada

In March 2020, Accenture helped the Canadian Government launch a new unemployment benefit—the Canada Emergency Response Benefit—providing financial support to Canadians impacted by COVID-19. In just four days, Accenture set up a call center for a team of 2,600 Canada-based agents, produced 25+ dual-language process documents and delivered 1,400 hours of training to enable remote handling of calls. Throughout April, as millions of Canadians applied for financial relief, the agents were successfully managing more than 40,000 calls a day⁸ while providing better, faster service to residents.

Germany

Another way that agencies are becoming more responsive to citizens is by providing services that are more personalized and adaptable. Germany's Federal Ministry of Labour is developing an end-to-end service anchored by a website tailored for individual users.

For example, it offers different services depending on someone's specific needs and demographics. The aim is to connect every citizen to the service or information they need within just three clicks.⁹



Anticipating demand

The world's most effective agencies go beyond responding to citizens' needs with new and more tailored services. They also anticipate demand and "bundle" their offerings to ensure the right combination of services is easily accessible to the right person at the right moment. Once again, this is an area where Singapore's agencies excel.

Parents in Singapore can now use a single smartphone app—developed by the country's Early Childhood and Development Agency—to register a child's birth, find and choose schools and access health records.

The ultimate goal: to create a single app for Singaporeans to use for all their government interactions.¹⁰

Looking across the efforts by leading human services providers worldwide to be more responsive, a clear theme emerges. Those in the vanguard have the biggest impact on their citizens' lives by delivering services in a frictionless way—meeting their needs with personalized experiences wherever and whenever they require.

Together, these findings indicate that agencies have an opportunity to prioritize delivering assistance more swiftly and seamlessly. The benefits of doing so can be considerable.

13%

of executives we surveyed in the United States said their agencies **have deployed new services on a large scale during the pandemic.** In other words, most still have much farther to go.



Priority 02

Become more accessible

Our research indicates that improving accessibility and transparency helps build trust and belief in the leadership and support offered by government.

The best way for human services to meet people's needs in the future? Shorter waiting times and better communication around eligibility for services. In the United States, 82% of respondents said they lack sufficient guidance on what services they're eligible for. Long waiting times are another problem, with 41% of US respondents saying these are their biggest obstacles to receiving a high-quality service. In addition, 36% indicated that reducing waiting times would be the best way to increase their trust in government.

36%

said that reducing wait times for services would be the best way to increase their trust in government.

Improving communication

An often undervalued benefit of deploying digital technologies is the opportunity to improve communication with residents, especially when it comes to eligibility, accessibility and status.

Crucially, this is also a key approach to making human services more accessible. Early in the pandemic, the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC)—which manages unemployment benefits for America’s second-most populous state—saw the number of calls to its hotline surge from 20,000 to 200,000 a day. To handle this massive increase in calls, the agency partnered with Accenture to create “Larry,” an artificial intelligence-powered Q&A agent on TWC’s website. In its first week, Larry interacted with 168,000 visitors and answered nearly 500,000 questions. The upshot: more Texans received vital support, as America’s unemployment rate soared to its highest since the Great Depression of the 1930s.



Reaching out across society

Beyond implementing smart technologies, making human services more accessible can involve broader forms of public outreach.

During 2020, Accenture worked with the Government of India's Digital India Corporation to create the "myGov Saathi" chatbot. myGov Saathi now provides reliable information about the coronavirus to 1.3 billion people across the country.

myGov Saathi can handle queries from 300,000 users per day and 20,000 concurrent users per minute, bridging the information gap between the Indian Government and citizens.

myGov Saathi also provides a convenient and powerful channel for communicating accurate information to safeguard lives—especially given the prominent but unwitting role played by young, asymptomatic people in spreading COVID-19.

Globally, even as vaccines roll out and social distancing rules relax, people will be seeking to access more services virtually going forward.

Accenture's Virtual Visits Solution is another way that governments are making services more accessible while increasing trust through safe, on-demand delivery.

The completely virtual solution allows for self-service appointment scheduling, document and information sharing, and follow-up interactions to maintain ongoing engagement between resident and service provider.



Priority 03

Embrace new technologies with human ingenuity

As we've highlighted, delivering improvements in both responsiveness and accessibility is vital for agencies to impact lives and livelihoods.

But each of these goals brings its own challenges—and agencies need to devote effort and investment inside their organization for residents to see results on the outside. Keeping pace with residents' needs also requires agencies to embed an organizational mindset that supports development of new ideas and adoption of new technologies.

Seizing opportunities generated by change

A case in point is the switch to remote working that many human services agencies made almost overnight. While this sudden shift posed fresh challenges, especially initially, our research confirms that it has also created new opportunities.

For example, 69% of US executives told us that working virtually has improved their employees' productivity. Thirteen percent reported no change, and 19% said they saw a decline (see Figure 1). A positive balance of executives said remote working has improved their employees' communication, collaboration and innovation.

New interactive tools like meeting platforms, live working sessions, and online survey and collaboration tools have helped within organizations that embraced them. However, it must be noted that employee morale remains a key challenge to address.

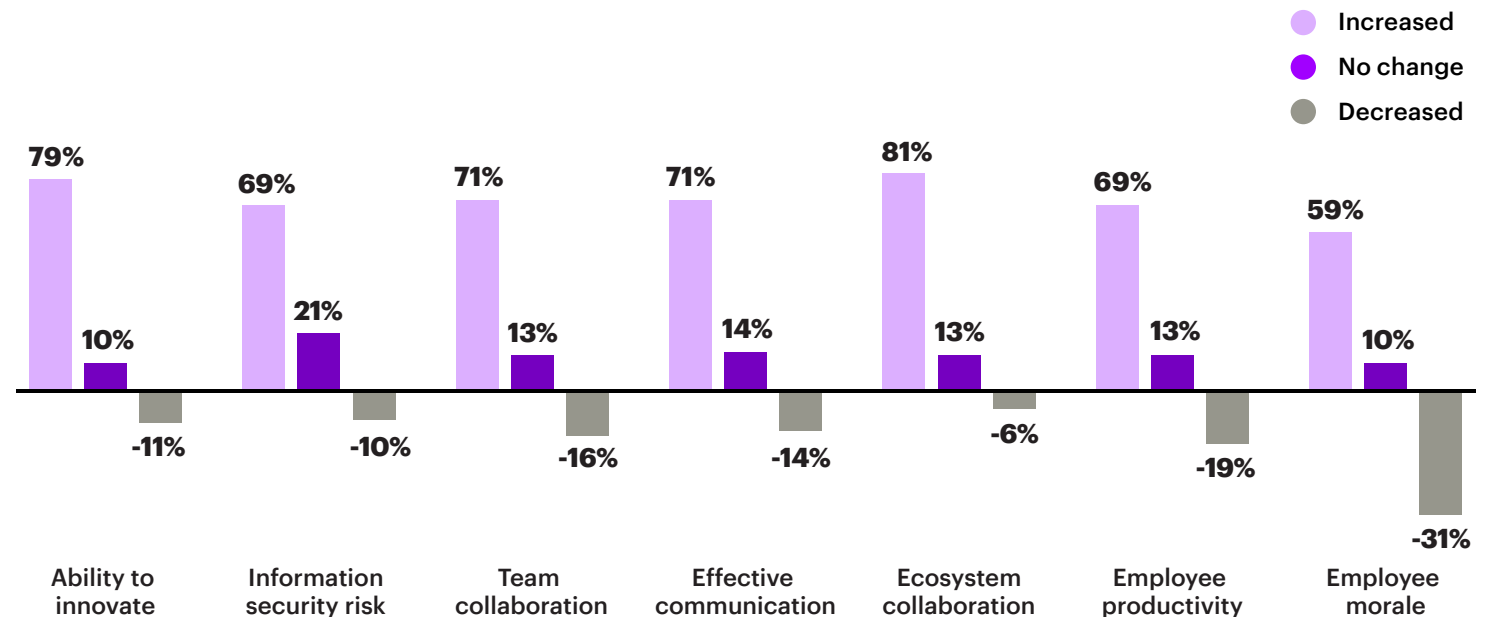


Figure 1: Impact of working virtually



Creating opportunities

To make the most of resulting opportunities, government agencies need the ability to develop and implement or adapt to new policies quickly and smoothly.

Unfortunately, less than half (41%) of US executives we surveyed strongly agreed that their organizations have the agility to pivot swiftly as conditions change. This needs to be addressed. There's no doubt that combining an agile mindset with the right technologies can enable teams to deliver better outcomes and experiences for the people they serve.

Only

41%

of US executives strongly agree that their agencies can pivot swiftly.

United States

Some state agencies, such as Indiana's Department of Child Services (DCS), have demonstrated how to harness technology to tackle persistent problems, even in the middle of a crisis. Before the pandemic, DCS suffered from high levels of turnover, as new case workers struggled to adapt to difficult on-the-job realities. Nearly 50% of staff left within their first two years of service, costing the Department \$73 million annually. To improve retention, DCS introduced the Accenture Virtual Experience Solution (AVEnueS)¹¹, a virtual-reality simulation. Prospective hires use AVEnueS to "experience" visiting a home and engaging with a family on the job. Since the introduction, DCS has slashed employee turnover from 53% to 19%.¹² The agency is now expanding its use of virtual reality to augment the skills of veteran case workers, too.

Indonesia

During the pandemic, the Indonesia Government's support for impoverished households provided a great example of adapting to new policies at pace. In too many countries, social safety nets are not sufficiently funded or structured to handle the kind of sharp rise in need triggered by the pandemic. In early 2020, Indonesia's national government tackled this problem head on. By working in partnership with the World Bank and local community groups, it applied advanced analytics to quickly identify and help 12 million newly impoverished households that otherwise would not have received timely support.¹³





Sharing ideas and data

These are the kinds of benefits that flow from an agile mindset—an approach that can also mean being ready to borrow good ideas from others.

Before the pandemic, Accenture launched a joint research project with the Australian National University's (ANU) Centre for Social Research and Methods (CSRM). The shared goal was to extend CSRM's policy modeling simulation platform with leading-edge desktop visualization tools to fast-track evaluation of new policy options.

The result of the project?

Policymakers now have a powerful desktop analytics platform to conduct real-world modeling and forecasting of the fiscal impacts of social policy decisions. Alongside the power of collaboration, our research highlights the need for governments to base their assumptions about residents' preferences on evidence, not hearsay. Consider data privacy. Contrary to what many might expect, 55% of those surveyed in the United States said this is a relatively low concern. What's more, 88% would be open to sharing their data with government departments in exchange for better services.

88%

of US respondents would be open to sharing their data with agencies in exchange for better services.

However, to succeed in increasing data sharing between residents and governments, agencies must take greater precautions.

Sixty-nine percent of US executives said cybersecurity risks to their agencies have escalated since the start of the pandemic. We see evidence of this in real-world attacks. For example, the US Department of Health and Human Services experienced 132 data breaches between February and May 2020, a 50% increase over 2019.¹⁴ In addition to improving security, agencies must be sure to share data in line with

data protection regulations and explain clearly to residents what they intend to do with it.

69%

of US executives said cybersecurity risks to their agencies have escalated since the start of the pandemic.



Tech investments postponed = benefits delayed

While an agile mindset is vital to offer residents more relevant and accessible services, something else is also essential: investment in new technologies.

US human services providers appear to be ahead of other countries in investing in modeling and forecasting analytics tools to improve operations. However, many still appear to be postponing investment in these and other technologies—even as employees see the benefits of the investments made to date. Our research figures tell the story.

57%

of US executives said their agencies have not yet invested in virtual work solutions.

56%

haven't invested in modular and flexible infrastructure, such as cloud.

57%

haven't invested in big data and analytics.

71%

haven't invested in artificial intelligence.



Toward a brighter future for Americans—and agencies

Alongside its other impacts, COVID-19 has dramatically underlined the crucial role of human services agencies in supporting the most vulnerable individuals and families across the US. The pandemic has also demonstrated the need for more effective human-centric delivery of these services.

And while technology is clearly part of the solution, it's just as important to embrace new organizational mindsets and ways of working. Agencies that commit today to meeting both imperatives will open the way to a brighter future for the people they serve—and for their own organizations.

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Contact any of our authors or contributors to talk about how these ideas can be applied to your human services agency.



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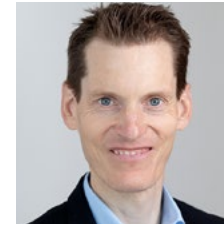
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- ⁵ Compilation of state-reported number of SNAP participants. CBPP. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and>
- ⁶ Some of the most well-known programs include unemployment insurance; supplemental nutrition assistance; supplemental security income; temporary assistance for needy families; public or subsidized housing; earned income tax credit; supplemental nutrition program for women, infants and children; and the childcare and development fund.
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