
Investing Human Services



Wisely!

Rocco Longo and Barbara Thornton

Northborough, Massachusetts, an affluent suburban town, population 11,445, outside of Boston, is more than 220 years old. Although the town has experienced considerable growth as a corporate and high-tech center, town government traditions have been around for a long time.

The phenomenal growth in community-based human services has occurred only in the past 20 years. Municipal officials, if they notice human services programs at all, have tended to identify them as part of the state government's role, unrelated to municipal operations. Traditional departments have become more human services-oriented. Police provide 24-hour crisis intervention in domestic disputes. Libraries, by default, offer after-school day care. Fire departments offer emergency medical care. Recreation departments offer social health programs for persons of all ages.

Programs Are Woven Together

As a result of a management study undertaken last year, town officials discovered that human-services programs are not easily separated from municipal government, but rather are woven together to serve the community. Not only state programs but municipal services themselves are organized to operate directly or provide funds for individual and family human services.

The report showed that the town actually spends *more* per capita on community-based human services than does the state through its "purchase-of-service" contracts. Municipal

government in Northborough spends an estimated \$191 per capita on human services. The state government spends \$147 per capita through its network of community-based human services providers.

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Although Northborough's kind of municipal expenditure may not be directly comparable to the state's, the data led town officials to two basic conclusions:

1. Through traditional departments such as police, fire, recreation, health, library, etc., the municipality invests a lot of money in human services. These investments deserve to be managed well on behalf of the people who need the services as well as of the community that pays for them.
2. The municipal level of government is more likely to define a community's needs accurately and meet those needs than is a more distant level of government, like the state.

These two conclusions led the town to ask, How can we manage our own resources better? and What can the town do to shape the state's human-services investments to meet our community's needs better?

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Management of Resources

In response to the town's family orientation, the municipal government has developed a network of services, including a youth commission that provides programs and individual counseling as well as coordination of services. In 1986, the town's department heads organized a human services council, which included representatives of citizens groups and a representative of a local nonprofit human-services agency. The town's board of selectmen passed a bylaw formally establishing the council. The council met at least once a month to share information among members.

Managers have no choice but to see themselves as human-services managers no matter whether the municipality is providing human services directly, funding services, or operating its traditional line departments.

A review of the town's organization revealed that two of the departments with key human-services responsibilities—the board of health and the veterans services office—were not included on the human services council. These two departments were brought into closer communication with the town's other human-services agencies.

The report also showed that the town was contributing its own funds to support nonprofit agencies that provide human services. These agencies looked to municipal government as a source of support comparable to a philanthropy. The town had, in fact, been acting like a philanthropy, committing funds without a solid determination of need. The town manager reinterpreted this relationship so that the town purchases services from provider agencies with a contract outlining the scope of services. The newly designed contract document describes what the agency will do for selected town departments, such as enabling town departments to make client referrals or call for technical assistance.

Probably the most significant result of the report is the town's examination of the potential consolidation of its family and children's services department and its recreation department. With more than \$3.5 million in state and municipal human services funds available to serve the community, it

makes sense to centralize the planning and coordination of social, health, and leisure services.

New Roles for Municipal Government

If the town's investment is greater than the state's, and the town is in a better position to define what the community-based human-services system should look like, what should the town do next?

The report showed more than 40 state-sponsored human-services agencies offering services to Northborough residents. Some of these agencies paralleled the services town departments might provide. Town officials wondered if they should compete to get state dollars to deliver these services through town departments, or whether they should try to influence the state's decisions to buy services that respond directly to the community's needs.

Northborough has begun to discuss these questions with neighboring municipalities. Municipalities can come together and agree on what services they need, what services they currently offer, and what kind of service provider is most appropriate for their communities. Municipalities, speaking as a group, have much more leverage with the state's policy-making and budgeting procedures than they do individually.

When state funds and local funds are combined, government is investing more than \$335 per capita. The notion of improving the effective management of such a substantial investment has appeal for Northborough administrators as well as for neighboring municipal officials.

Message from a Manager

Human services encompasses more of a local government's services than most people perceive. Managers have no choice but to see themselves as human-services managers no matter whether the municipality is providing human services directly, funding services, or operating its traditional line departments.

Each year, human services become a more and more significant part of local government. This trend will continue as both federal and state government services and money disappear from local government for human services. Because human services is such a significant (and growing) part of almost every service offered by municipalities, it is imperative that local government managers and administrators become human-services managers. **PM**