

Looking Back to Accelerate Moving Forward

Charting Our Next Course





Note: This article is adapted from Tracy Wareing Evans' opening remarks at the 2022 APHSA National Health and Human Services Summit in June, which celebrated the Association's 90th anniversary.

By Tracy Wareing Evans

As we celebrate our milestone birthday, we take some time to reflect on our past. It has been 90 years since our first offices opened as the American Public Welfare Association in Chicago. The record actually shows our official beginning as 1930, not 1932—when a group of state officials charged with the distribution of “relief” in the wake of the Great Depression created an association to help represent their concerns to the federal government and carry out their new functions. Just a few years later, the Social Security Act was passed, shaped in part by direct input from the founders of this organization.

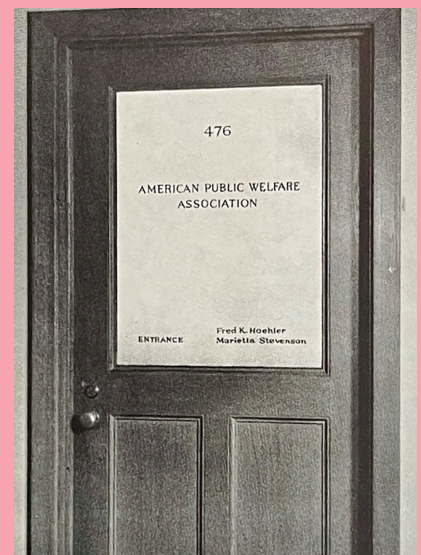
As our celebration was postponed due to the pandemic, we now acknowledge a “90-ish” celebration that recognizes our beginning across the first two years of the Association's existence.

Our Roots Grew Out of the Great Depression

In preparing for our 90th anniversary, we took a look back at the entirety of our history as a member association, digging into our archives, and pulling out some important threads and markers in our history. Of particular mention is First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt who spoke, in 1935, at that year's national roundtable and many others over the next decade.

In 1993, a former deputy director of APHSA, Linda Wolf, wrote this in our magazine at the time: “Imagine yourself in that audience [of the first lady]. Would you have understood the historic nature of the times and the importance of her message? Would you have had a glimmer of the icon Mrs. Roosevelt was to become? Probably not.”

More notably, Ms. Wolf goes on to say that “The truth is ... that *we are the movers*, the shapers, and the witnesses of history in our field; and we stand in the streams of time with some marvelous company.”



APWA's original front door in Chicago.

As we start charting our next course, we also commemorate the work of those who have come before us—whose vision, time, and energy shaped what human services is today. It is equally important that we understand where we have been in order to assess in what ways we have come up short and why. As James A. Baldwin said:

“The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all we do.”

Baldwin’s message reminds us that history is an ever-present force.

Our Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

—Langston Hughes

Last year we launched a podcast series that explores a question posited by poet Langston Hughes 70 years ago: What happens to a dream deferred? Alluding to the American dream that feels elusive for many, he asked what might happen if our nation’s offer of endless possibilities remained out of reach and unrealized. His question rings true today.

I mention the podcast because it includes history and historians, among other disciplines outside of our field, to help us to better understand what has shaped, and is shaping us as a



Catch up on Season One on Spotify, Apple, or other streaming platforms by searching for “Our Dream Deferred.”

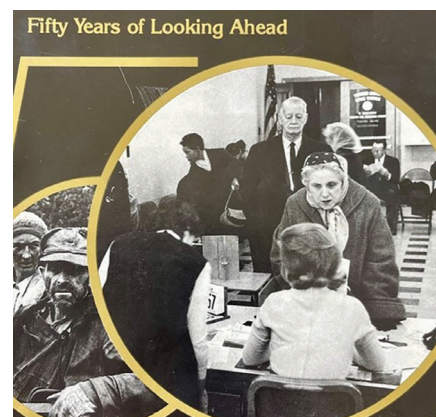
nation in order to illuminate our way forward. In Season One, historian and author Tim Snyder reminded us that the history we often parse into bits and pieces—by time period, by region or country, by people—is, indeed, “all one history ... and what we do with it next is up to us.”

Another podcast guest, Derrik Anderson, helps us see our role as truth-tellers. He explains that we must all be truth-tellers—always asking ourselves as systems leaders: Who has benefitted and who has been burdened by our policies and practices? We also must constantly strive for a shared language and understanding if equity principles are to truly drive our policy decisions, and change our practice.

What Was Discussed When We Turned 50?

So, what exactly were leaders in the field talking about when APHSA turned 50? In reading through the archives, I was struck by comments made by Edgar May who was then a Vermont state legislator and a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. May gave the keynote at the Association’s 50th anniversary national conference. In his remarks, May challenged the audience to recognize the ways in which the field itself was contributing to the increased scrutiny and suspicion of this nation’s social and economic programs—by both overpromising and being unwilling to talk candidly about failures.

May described what he called our over-fascination with *declaring war* on social ills (referring to the war on poverty), and how that kind of talk generated expectations among the public and policymakers that could not be met. When programs to relieve poverty are expected to eliminate it and don’t, we are left with greater frustration, greater skepticism. And, when we don’t speak about what doesn’t or hasn’t worked, we also breed mistrust.



Anniversary issue of the *Public Welfare* journal celebrating 50 years of the American Public Human Services Association (nee APWA).

Getting Underneath the Stories We’ve Been Told

Today we would call this a lesson in narrative—it is a lesson we are still learning today. I continue to be struck by the power of narrative—both good and bad—and why it is so important to



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understand dominant narratives and social norms at their roots. As author and advocate Heather McGee so effectively captures: “Everything we believe is based on a story we have been told.”

It is our job to help get underneath those stories, revealing how narratives have shaped systems and built bias and racism into our structures. It is a key step in deconstructing what is in the way.

Put another way, if we only see the trees, we see only part of the view. To understand our full story, we need to ensure we have the entire forest in our line of sight. To do so requires intentional understanding about how policy decisions and actions appear in our story line across generations of our nation’s history.

The notion of getting at root causes is not a new principle for APHSA. In 1963, journalist David Brinkley gave the keynote on the cusp of civil rights legislation. He opened by saying he had read the Association’s various resolutions and goals, and shared wholeheartedly the “feeling expressed in the resolution calling for equal treatment of everybody receiving public assistance, regardless of race or color or any other consideration ... and that the only way to solve the problem is to remove the causes and not just to treat the effects.” While we know much more about what this entails today, and need to own the ways we’ve fallen short, it is important to acknowledge it is part of our DNA.

Macro-Level Forces

Now for our nearer-term history—the collective experiences we lived over the past few years. I often find myself reflecting on the historic moment we are living in—wondering how my 14-year-old son will one day describe this time to his grandkids.

The major forces affecting us are not limited to the United States—they are felt across the globe—from the pandemic and all its social and economic repercussions to the ongoing calls for racial justice, elevated throughout the world with the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, to the nation’s ever-deepening political division, to the ways in which extreme weather is impacting communities across the country.

What is now possible, in light of these macro-level shifts, is a key “through line” for us—as systems leaders in a field that is at the cornerstone of building child and family well-being and advancing social and economic mobility.

We need to pause for a moment and reflect on how the weight of these forces, among others, is being felt across the nation, particularly in light of very recent events. A few months ago, we were shocked by the brutal attack on innocent people in a grocery store in Buffalo, NY, and then stunned by the murder of 19 children and two teachers in Uvalde, TX. Since then, there have been countless more mass shootings. These crimes came on the second anniversary of the murder of George Floyd, and they are happening against the broader background of the war in Ukraine and the third year of a pandemic that has killed millions of people around the world (and more than a million in the United States alone).

And those are just the big headlines. Words fail us. Nothing comes close to describing our sadness, the feelings of hopelessness, grief, and frustration; how our hearts break for those killed and those who love them; and our fear about what this all means for the future of our nation, our communities, and our own families.

My intent is to not to relive these experiences—but to hold a place for them as individual and collective experiences that have shaped our way forward over the past two years.

Macro Shifts and Insights

These forces have accelerated paradigm shifts across the nation and revealed more clearly the challenges—some long standing and some new—before us. The content and experiences at our Summit in June reflected these macro shifts and insights. What is now possible, in light of these macro-level shifts, is a key “through line” for us—as systems leaders in a field that is at the cornerstone of building child and family

well-being and advancing social and economic mobility.

The Early Focus

Over the past two years, human services rose to the challenge in several major areas.

- The workforce shifted to remote work and essential-worker designations with a focus on health and safety
- Service delivery required innovation in reaching and connecting with families during shutdown
- A surge in need created an unprecedented number of applications with reduced staff and budget uncertainty
- New emergency response programs were implemented, such as Pandemic-EBT and rental assistance
- Systems coordination heightened partnerships with education and health sectors

Evolving Focus Through 2021/mid 2022

- Attending to workforce well-being, retaining, and attracting staff in midst of the Great Migration
- Directing resources to communities most marginalized and getting underneath systemic and structural inequities
- Shifting mindsets from budget cuts to once-in-a-generation investment opportunities through the American Rescue Plan Act
- Responding to changing program rules and reduced flexibilities as COVID-19 policies shifted
- Aligning benefits across multiple systems, especially as public health emergency comes to an end

Every Day We Are Learning

There is at least one truth in what we have collectively experienced. Every day we are learning.

See Charting Our Next Course on page 31

Amanda Gorman's poem from her collection, *Call Us What We Carry*, is so poignant for this moment:

*Every day we are learning
How to live with essence not ease.
How to move with haste, never hate.
How to leave this pain that is beyond us
Behind us.
Just like a skill or any art,
We cannot possess hope without
practicing it.
It is the most fundamental craft we
demand of ourselves.*

—Amanda Gorman

Leadership in Human Services Today ... Is Not This

In many ways, during the past 27 months, this has been our job—revolutionary, action oriented, and edgy “doing.” We were all called to that job title and defined its roles and responsibilities. And many of us, by the same token, are now feeling the pull of the old structures and systems, shifting us back to the way things were—which is not the desired state.

My own reflections during this time keep coming back to what it means to “lead.” The word itself traces itself to the word *laitho*, meaning way or journey.” To *lead*, then, means to “cause to go along one’s way.” Put another way, the root of the word is about taking a step forward, and then another...

But we also know that going along one’s way does not itself create a successful journey. Reassessing our roles as leaders is one way to disrupt the status quo systems that tug at us daily.

What is Our Next Course?

Maya Angelou said, “If you are going down a road and don’t like what’s in front of you, and look behind you and don’t like what you see, get off the road. Create a new path!”

So what is our new path or our next course? We’re discovering that together, and the content of June’s Summit brought it all into greater focus. A few key themes included:

Centering Community

We must do more to center power structures with people, not systems. It is not enough to understand that lived experience is lived expertise; nor is it enough to just give space for the voice of people who experience the systems we run.

Centering people most affected by poverty and adversity requires being involved and having equal power and influence in decision making. People—youth, parents, families, and community leaders—must be the lead architects.

We also have to be honest about the systems we work in. As human services leaders, we must be able to see the unvarnished truth of how people and communities experience the systems we run in order to deconstruct and reconfigure them to work for everyone.

Unlocking the Potential of the Workforce


The health and well-being of the human services workforce remains a top priority. Indeed, it is the number one issue we hear about from human services leaders across the nation.

While this is not a new issue, the winds have shifted. Leaders recognize that staff at all levels of their agency, as well as across the many community-based organizations we work alongside, bear the weight of outdated and misaligned systems. Too often they carry the blame when the systems do not meet our expectations. We have to flip this paradigm to invest in the workforce, provide them with the modern tools they need, and support their ongoing learning in human-centered design and community engagement. We also need to ensure the staff reflects the communities they serve.

Partnering to Align Systems

While partnering is not new for us, how we do it and for what purpose, must evolve. If we do not align our systems to work with and through the organizations most proximate to people, shifting the dynamics of power from government-led processes to people- and community-led roadmaps, we will keep coming up short. We are thrilled that a number of community-based, philanthropic, academic, and private-industry partners were with us at the Summit, representing a range of systems that human services work alongside.

What Gives Me Hope

Building common ground is the core of who we are. From our start in the 1930s, we have been focused on building common ground so people, and the communities where they live, can thrive. Our members and partners come from a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives across the political spectrum. What constantly gives me hope and inspires our team at APHSA to lean in, is the way in which leaders like all of you show up every day with a resolute focus on your mission and a desire to continually learn from community and each other, irrespective of different ideologies and approaches. We are humbled and grateful to work in support of human services leaders and the ways in which each of you contributes to the public good every day. 



**“I’m naming you VP of Revolution, Action and Edgy Thinking ...
on one condition ...
that you promise not to change anything.”**