



**Helping those in need:
Human service workers**



Many people experience hardship and need help. This help is provided by a network of agencies and organizations, both public and private. Staffed by human service workers, this network, and the kinds of help it offers, is as varied as the clients it serves. “Human services tend to be as broad as the needs and problems of the client base,” says Robert Olding, president of the National Organization for Human Services in Woodstock, Georgia.

Human service workers help clients become more self-sufficient. They may do this by helping them learn new skills or by recommending resources that allow them to care for themselves or work to overcome setbacks. These workers also help clients who are unable to care for themselves, such as children and the elderly, by coordinating the provision of their basic needs.

The first section of this article explains the duties of human service workers and the types of assistance they provide. The next several sections detail the populations served by, and the occupations commonly found in, human services. Another section describes some benefits and drawbacks to the work, and the section that follows discusses the education and skills needed to enter human service occupations. The final section lists sources of additional information.

What human service workers do

Human service workers provide a variety of services aimed at improving clients’ lives. The type of assistance they offer varies by client group, the type of organization that employs these workers, and their role in the organization. (See the box on page 25 for more information about different types of human service organizations.)

Although duties vary by job, all human service workers perform many of the same basic tasks. They evaluate a client’s needs, create a treatment plan, and put the plan into



action. Throughout the process, they provide clients with emotional support.

Evaluate and plan

Working closely with the client, human service workers identify problems and create a plan for services to help the client solve these problems. This process—which includes evaluating the client’s support system, environment, and values—is tailored to each individual’s needs. “Steps differ, based on where the client is at that point in time,” says Deborah Jackson, a family self-sufficiency coordinator for a housing commission in the Annapolis, Maryland, area.

Human service workers can’t force help on someone who doesn’t want it, and they can’t take over a client’s life. Instead, they try to help every client make good decisions, find resources to overcome problems, and inspire the client to make improvements. “I know they can succeed,” Jackson says of her clients, “but I can’t succeed for them.”

Put the plan into action

After evaluating the client’s situation and creating a plan, human service workers put the

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plan into effect. This may include providing direct assistance or helping clients in coordinating services, or both.

Practical assistance helps clients accomplish daily living activities: eating, bathing, dressing, and so forth. Workers most often provide this assistance in institutions, such as hospitals, shelters, and residential care facilities for people who are elderly or disabled. Practical assistance might also include helping clients with recreational activities, from arts and crafts to games.

In addition, human service workers coordinate services that are provided by their own or other organizations, including government, for-profit, and nonprofit agencies. They help clients by researching types of, and eligibility requirements for, assistance. For example, human service workers might help a client who lives in unsafe housing locate and qualify for low-income apartments in the client's community. Another way that human service

workers help coordinate services is to assist clients with completing necessary paperwork.

After clients begin receiving assistance, human service workers monitor the clients' status to ensure that services are being provided and are appropriate. Jackson, for example, sees her clients about once a week so she can track their progress.

Provide emotional support

Because their clients often face many difficult problems simultaneously, human service workers routinely provide emotional support along with other forms of help. These workers must foster a good working relationship to ensure that a client feels comfortable discussing problems candidly and asking for help.

The kind of emotional care human service workers provide ranges from empathy to celebration, depending on what a client is experiencing. "Clients have the enthusiasm to improve their lives," says Jackson. "It's often a

Human service workers act as liaisons between clients and care providers.



Types of human service organizations

Human service agencies are often managed by state or local governments. There is also a large number of nonprofit—and some for-profit—human service organizations. Some organizations focus on working with a particular population or alleviating a specific type of problem. Others work with a wide range of populations and issues.

Most of these organizations are part of the social assistance industry. The organization types described below differ somewhat from the formal classifications that BLS uses.

Employment agencies provide clients with the assistance necessary to find and keep jobs. Employment agencies include job placement agencies and vocational rehabilitation services for people with disabilities.

Food and nutrition agencies help clients get healthy meals or learn the skills necessary to prepare nutritious meals themselves. Food delivery programs and food banks are examples.

Housing and shelter organizations help clients find appropriate temporary or permanent housing. Organizations include senior housing facilities, homeless shelters, and transitional housing.

Legal and victims assistance organizations assist people who have been victims of crime. These organizations also provide information to educate the public about crime prevention, and they help rehabilitate people who have been convicted of crimes. Examples include abuse prevention programs, juvenile justice organizations, and prisoner rehabilitation programs.

Multipurpose human service organizations provide multiple services that help clients improve their situation. Among these organizations are senior citizen centers, foster care and adoption agencies, and women's shelters.

Public safety and disaster relief organizations help people prepare for and recover from disasters. Examples include disaster relief and search-and-rescue organizations.

Youth development organizations provide recreational and social programs for children and teenagers. Among these are Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Boys & Girls Clubs, and afterschool programs.

lack of confidence that prevents them. They've never had someone encourage them.”

However, human service workers are trained to recognize when emotional support and encouragement are not enough. In those cases, human service workers may direct a client toward additional support services to address more serious issues, such as domestic violence.

Populations served by human service workers

Human service workers assist a diverse population of clients, who are of every age and have a broad range of issues. “The client base of human services runs the gamut,” says the

National Organization of Human Services' Olding. Neil Headman, assistant professor of human services at the University of Illinois at Springfield, agrees. “It doesn't matter who your client is,” he says. “Everyone needs help.”

The following overview of types of clients is not exhaustive. Furthermore, clients dealing with more than one problem may fall into more than one group; for example, someone with a mental illness may also have a problem with substance abuse.

Children and families. Human service workers ensure that children live in safe homes and have their basic needs met. Guiding parents in caring for their children may include assisting with applications for food stamps or low-income housing and locating reliable childcare.

In some cases, such as those involving physical abuse or domestic violence, human service workers might recommend that children be removed from their parents' custody and be placed in foster care or group homes. This removal may be temporary or permanent, but the goal is to work with parents toward improving the situation so that children can return home. "The best place to serve kids is in their home and with a family," says Joan Wallace-Benjamin, who runs a child welfare agency in the Boston, Massachusetts, area. If a return home isn't possible, human service workers try to find permanent homes and adoptive parents for the children.

The elderly. Human service workers who assist older clients help them to live independently in their own homes whenever possible.

Human service workers assist clients of all ages.



This might mean coordinating the delivery of prepared meals or the placement of personal care aides to help with daily living activities.

For older clients who are unable to live alone, human service workers help with their placement in nursing homes or other residential care facilities. For clients nearing the end of their lives, human service workers may coordinate the provision of hospice care. (For information on nursing careers in nursing homes and other facilities, see "Nursing jobs in nursing homes," in the spring 2011 issue of the *Quarterly*, available online at www.bls.gov/ooq/2011/spring/art03.pdf.)

The homeless. Human service workers help people who are homeless to meet basic needs. Human service workers may refer clients to a variety of providers, such as temporary or permanent housing facilities, organizations that serve meals, and job centers that can assist the clients in learning new skills or finding jobs. Some clients might need help finding treatment to address an underlying cause of homelessness.

Immigrants. Immigrants often need help adjusting to life in a new country. Human service workers help them find housing, jobs, and other resources, such as programs for learning English. In some cases, human service workers also refer clients to legal aid services to assist immigrants with paperwork and other administrative issues.

People with addictions. Human service workers help people who are struggling with many types of addiction, such as to alcohol or gambling. They evaluate clients' needs and then direct clients to rehabilitation facilities, including both inpatient and outpatient treatment centers, that can best meet those needs. They also refer clients to groups or programs to help clients get support outside of treatment. Some human service workers might work with families of addicts, helping family members understand the nature of addiction and referring them to support programs for families.

People with criminal records. People who have been imprisoned face challenges re-entering society, such as overcoming

the stigma of their criminal record. Human service workers help these clients integrate back into society by matching them with job training or placement programs, helping them find housing, and directing them to support programs so they avoid reoffending.

People with disabilities. In working with people who have disabilities, human service workers often focus on helping clients live independently. Types of assistance include finding rehabilitation services to help clients adapt to the disability, working with employers on adjusting job details so that positions may be filled by clients with disabilities, and referring clients to personal care services that can help with daily living activities.

For people with disabilities who cannot live independently, human service workers help locate suitable residential care facilities.

People with mental illnesses. Human service workers direct clients who are mentally ill to appropriate resources, such as self-help and support groups. In addition, they help clients with severe mental illness to become self-sufficient and receive proper care. Human service workers refer these clients to providers of personal care services, group housing, or residential care facilities.

Veterans. For some veterans, adjusting to civilian life after military service can be difficult. Human service workers assist these veterans in a variety of ways: finding housing, adapting skills gained in the military to civilian jobs, and navigating through the extensive network of veteran services available.

Combat veterans often face additional challenges, such as adapting to physical or mental disability. Human service workers direct veterans with disabilities to services that provide appropriate assistance.

Common jobs for human service workers

Human service agencies are organized differently, but some jobs are common to many of them. Not all of these positions are in all agencies; job tasks in one position may



Aiding clients with disabilities often centers around helping them to live independently.

overlap with those in another, and some agencies may use different titles. Furthermore, job titles include occupations that are found outside of human services, and job tasks may differ in other settings.

Jobs in human services are separated into two types: Those in which workers deal directly with clients and those in which workers provide administrative support for an organization that provides services. Both types are essential for human service organizations to run effectively.

Direct work with clients

Human service workers who deal directly with clients are responsible for providing the services that an organization offers. Job titles for people who work directly with clients include the following:

Case workers and case managers. Case workers and case managers assess clients' needs and work with them to develop a treatment plan. These workers, who are sometimes called social and human service assistants, help clients in choosing among suitable resources and then follow up to ensure that the services provided are appropriate.

Counselors. These workers provide individual and group counseling to help clients with marital difficulties or other problems or in making decisions, such as about career options. Counselors may diagnose and treat mental and emotional disorders. Some specialize in working with specific populations, such as children and families or veterans.

Psychologists. Psychologists diagnose and treat emotional and mental disorders. They provide therapy to individuals, groups, and families. They may design, or assist other human service workers in developing, individual treatment plans for clients.

Social workers. Social workers help clients cope with or solve everyday problems,

such as difficulty getting organized. After talking with clients, the social worker may provide strategies to help them modify their behaviors or environments. A social worker also acts as an advocate for clients and refers them to other resources.

Administrative workers

Administrative workers provide the management and support necessary for a human service organization to function. Job titles for administrative workers in human services include the following:

Development directors. These workers create their organization's fundraising strategy and supervise fundraising activities. They work with the executive director and program directors to determine funding needs and then meet with potential donors to explain these needs and how donations are used to serve the community. Development directors often supervise other staff members, such as grant writers.

Counselors and psychologists are among the human service workers who deal directly with clients.



Executive directors. Executive directors oversee the operation of human service organizations. They perform high-level administrative tasks that range from budgeting to human resources management. Much of their time is spent meeting with policymakers, community leaders, and others interested in their organization and its programs. Executive directors also are responsible for setting the organization's goals and for ensuring that staff members work toward those goals.

Grant writers. Grant writers research sources of funding for which their organizations are eligible. They prepare and maintain records regarding applications, funding received, and how funds are spent.

Program directors. These workers design and implement human service programs. They assess the needs of the population that their organization serves and create programs to meet those needs. Program directors supervise staff members and ensure that the program meets state and federal criteria for service providers. These workers also may be responsible for collecting data that are used to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs.

Ups and downs of human service work

Human service work is both rewarding and challenging. Like most careers, however, the suitability of workers for these jobs varies by individual. "It's wonderful work," says Carol Goertzel, president and chief executive officer of human service agencies in Holmes, Pennsylvania, "but it's not for everybody."

Human service workers help clients improve their lives, and it's satisfying to see results over time. These results are often dramatic and show how much people can accomplish when they get professional help. "Anyone who expects big results within short periods of time is asking a lot from people who've had no support," Goertzel says. "We see people make incredible changes."

Most human service workers build relationships with their clients out of concern



Grant writers prepare and maintain records regarding grant applications, any funding received, and how funds are spent.

and a desire to help, aware that clients don't always express their gratitude. "You can't expect people to say, 'Thank you so much. You helped me today,'" Goertzel says.

As the U.S. population grows, so will the demand for the kinds of help human service agencies provide. However, financial resources available to these organizations do not grow as quickly as the demand for services, increasing competition among agencies seeking funds from the same donors. Human service workers are often asked to provide additional services without having access to additional resources. Some workers find the resulting stress difficult to manage.

Much of a human service organization's budget is based on highly unpredictable charitable donations. Because wages are usually tied to this variable budget, workers in human service jobs tend to earn less than those in occupations requiring similar levels of education.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) does not collect employment and wage data specifically on human service workers.

However, BLS does collect data on occupations—including several types of counselors, psychologists, and social workers—in which workers provide human services in the social assistance industry. (See table below.)

Few human service workers pursue these careers solely for the income, though. Workers cite a passion for the field, noting that human service jobs provide opportunities to help people in need and to find solutions to community problems.

Getting into human services

People are drawn to human services for different reasons. Backgrounds vary, but personal experience is sometimes a motivator. Jackson, for example, says that surviving domestic violence stirred her desire to help others. “My

philosophy is that I went through what I went through for a reason,” she says. “My role is to help people.”

Jobs in human services are based on the client population served. Workers who enter these occupations often have similar skills, although their education levels may vary.

Skills

“Human service workers are trained with a core set of skills that they can apply anywhere,” says the University of Illinois’ Headman. Chief among these are interpersonal and communication skills, because most workers deal directly with a variety of people. Building relationships with clients involves listening to a client’s problems, needs, and concerns and communicating solutions, treatments, or services for them. In addition, human service workers must work well on teams because

Employment and wages for selected human service workers in social assistance, May 2010

Occupation	Employment ¹	Annual median wage ²
Counselors		
Substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors	14,190	\$36,790
Educational, guidance, school, and vocational counselors	20,930	35,370
Marriage and family therapists	10,880	41,320
Mental health counselors	24,000	37,410
Rehabilitation counselors	50,730	29,650
Counselors, all other	6,360	33,170
Psychologists		
Clinical, counseling, and school psychologists	8,000	\$56,080
Social and human services		
Social and human service assistants	130,210	\$26,550
Social workers		
Child, family, and school social workers	76,180	\$34,640
Healthcare social workers	18,880	38,910
Mental health and substance abuse social workers	25,410	35,720
Social workers, all other	13,880	36,340

¹ Estimates do not include self-employed workers.

² The median is the wage at which half of workers earned more and half earned less.



Human service workers should be empathetic and able to communicate well.

they often collaborate with others in their field.

Human service workers also need analytical skills to help clients develop strategies to solve problems. The ability to think creatively helps workers determine ways to get around hurdles that interfere with clients' efforts to succeed.

In addition, human service workers should be compassionate and patient. Most of their clients are in stressful situations, so it is important for these workers to be empathetic and sensitive to their clients' emotional needs.

Education

Educational requirements in human service organizations vary with the type of work performed. However, many human service workers have some kind of postsecondary degree. The education level usually ranges from an associate's degree to a master's degree, depending on workers' titles.

At all education levels, degrees are offered in human services, counseling, social work, and psychology. Most programs require some fieldwork, such as an internship, so that

students get practical experience working with clients. The level of education generally dictates the type of work someone may perform and the amount of responsibility he or she may be given.

Associate's degree. Human service workers with an associate's degree often perform entry-level tasks. They spend most of their time interviewing new clients and managing details of cases. They help connect clients with appropriate resources and complete any required paperwork.

Bachelor's degree. Those who have a bachelor's degree spend much of their time managing client cases, just as workers with an associate's degree do. They also provide some clinical support.

Master's degree. Workers with a master's degree focus primarily on clinical work, providing counseling to clients. In some states or settings, these workers may need to be supervised by a licensed professional—such as a psychologist, social worker, or counselor—or they may be required to hold a license themselves.



For more information

Your local library may have books and periodicals about human service work. To learn more about specific occupations, consider visiting human service organizations to ask about opportunities for gaining experience, such as internships, job shadowing, and informational interviewing.

Another source of information about hundreds of occupations is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. The *Handbook* provides detailed information about occupations with tasks that are similar to those of human service workers. In addition to more detailed information about counselors, social workers, and psychologists—all of which were described briefly in this article—related *Handbook* occupations include social and community service managers, health educators, and social and human service assistants. The *Handbook* is available in many public libraries and career centers or online at www.bls.gov/ooh.

Several associations also have information specific to careers in human services. Contact the following organizations to learn more:

National Organization for
Human Services
5314 Old Highway 5
Suite 206 #214
Woodstock, GA 30188
(770) 924-8899

www.nationalhumanservices.org
National Human Services Assembly
1319 F St., NW
Suite 402
Washington, DC 20004
(202) 347-2080

www.nationalassembly.org
Council for Standards in Human Service
Education
2118 Plum Grove Rd.
#297
Rolling Meadows, IL 60008
www.cshse.org



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- Data in graphic format (winter 2011–12 *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*)
- Detailed articles about the projections (February 2012 *Monthly Labor Review*)
- Links to 2010–20 projections highlights (February news release)
- Completely revised online edition of *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (spring 2012)

See first links online February 1, 2012, at www.bls.gov/emp.