

Social Services Departments Struggle with Growing Demand and Workforce Shortages

Social services departments across the United States are facing a growing crisis: recruitment and retention issues are making it increasingly difficult to maintain a stable workforce. As the cost of living rises and economic conditions worsen for many families, the demand for support continues to increase. Many departments, already operating at full capacity, are struggling to meet this surge in need.

According to the New York Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, in June 2024, 2,961,711 people used the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), reflecting a 2.4 percent increase over the previous year. This rise underscores the growing demand for food assistance as more households face financial challenges. The uptick in SNAP participants mirrors broader trends of rising living costs, highlighting the critical role these programs play in supporting vulnerable populations across New York State.

Yet, while demand for services has surged, social services departments are experiencing declining staffing levels. For example, New York City's social services workforce has shrunk considerably, dropping from a peak of 25,431 employees in 2006 to just 18,928 in 2023. That is a 25.5 percent decrease in workforce size. This reduction in staff means that many departments are struggling to keep up with the demands of administering essential programs like SNAP and Medicaid.

Workforce shortages are felt throughout New York State like in Clinton County's Department of Social Services (DSS). Facing a 20 percent increase in SNAP applications, Clinton County's workforce is stretched thin, with staff processing 15 cases per day, per employee—pushing the system to its breaking point.

The Impact of Workforce Shortages on Service Delivery

The workforce shortage is having profound effects on the customers who rely on social services. Understaffed teams are overwhelmed by the volume of cases, leading to delays in processing applications for critical services such as food and healthcare assistance. These delays can have serious repercussions for vulnerable families, preventing them from accessing the resources they need in a timely manner.

Additionally, staff burnout is becoming a significant issue. Social workers are being asked to take on additional responsibilities. This added pressure increases the risk of errors and further delays, exacerbating the already strained system. Workers on the front lines of

social services are feeling the effects of both the growing demand and the limited capacity to meet it.

A Path Forward: Modernizing Social Services with AI

Recognizing these systemic challenges, some counties are turning to innovative solutions to alleviate the pressure on their staff and improve service delivery. Clinton County and other forward-thinking departments are exploring the potential of AI-driven technologies to modernize their operations.

EVA, a virtual assistant powered by artificial intelligence (AI), is one such solution being deployed to help streamline eligibility processes, automate routine tasks, and enhance client communication. By implementing EVA, departments like Clinton County DSS can offload time-consuming tasks such as handling client inquiries and managing document submissions, freeing up staff to focus on more complex casework.

Commissioner Christine Peters of Clinton County DSS sees the adoption of AI as a way to support her staff and ease their burden:

In partnering with TipCo, I saw this solution as supporting staff and easing some of the burden on both frontline and supervisory staff. AI can be scary, but compassionate AI is empowering—it empowers workers to do higher level tasks that humans should do, such as eligibility determinations.

Jefferson County DSS has already seen improvements after implementing EVA. Staff have reported time savings, especially in tasks like client interviews, where the AI system has reduced time spent on routine inquiries by 10 minutes per interaction.

Faced with staff shortages and many new staff, Jefferson County has been looking for creative ways to get the job done quickly and accurately. When we heard about TipCo and their AI named EVA, it made sense to try it. We have found that EVA saves the workers time by delivering the message of Rights & Responsibilities. This allows the staff to focus on what has changed for the household, collecting the correct documentation and processing the case. It is also important to note that EVA delivers the same message each and every time. We have a transcript of what EVA told the client. The transcript also documents that the client stated their name and date of birth indicating that they understood. Accuracy, Consistency, and a Time Saver...we felt it was time to ACT by bringing EVA to our county.

—Tami Tarwater, Income Maintenance Supervisor, Jefferson County DSS

Transforming the Future of Social Services

Although technology is not a panacea for the complex challenges facing social services departments, tools like EVA represent a step forward in addressing the pressing issue of



workforce shortages. By automating routine tasks and improving operational efficiency, departments can focus their limited resources on providing the personalized attention that customers need.

The strain on social services systems across the country shows no signs of letting up. With increasing poverty rates, rising living costs, and shrinking workforces, the pressure on social services departments is immense. However, by embracing innovative solutions, counties have an opportunity to modernize their operations, reduce staff burnout, and ensure that vulnerable populations continue to receive timely support.

While the challenges are great, the commitment of social service leaders to explore new ways of working is essential to building a more sustainable and efficient system—one that works for both the staff and the people they serve.