



Strategic Assessment: Franklin County Human Services Ecosystem

Executive Summary

Franklin County's human services ecosystem is at a pivotal moment. This strategic assessment combines quantitative data from 211 human services agencies with qualitative insights gathered from frontline workers, nonprofit leaders, funders, and system partners to provide a comprehensive picture of the sector's current condition. Together, these findings reveal a network of organizations operating under significant financial and operational strain while continuing to demonstrate remarkable resilience, innovation, and commitment to serving the community.

The assessment identifies three interconnected trends that are placing unprecedented pressure on the sector. First, demand for services has increased substantially, with 75% of providers reporting growth in the number of individuals seeking assistance and an average increase in demand of 15–20%. At the same time, funding resources have become increasingly constrained. Nearly 45% of organizations report losing general grant funding, while 69% anticipate operating with a budget deficit. These financial pressures are compounded by rising operational costs, with organizations experiencing cost increases of 10–25% driven by higher salaries and benefits, insurance premiums, technology investments, and regulatory compliance requirements.

The combined effect of these trends has created widespread financial instability across the provider network. Approximately 69% of organizations—representing roughly 145 agencies—are currently experiencing or anticipating financial instability while collectively serving more than 450,000 Franklin County residents each year. The impact of federal funding uncertainty is especially pronounced among refugee services, where 85% of programs report significant effects, followed by nutrition programs supported through SNAP and USDA funding (70%) and community outreach services (60%).

Financial challenges are further intensified by a workforce under increasing strain. More than one-quarter of organizations (27%) report difficulty offering competitive wages, while 21% have experienced service disruptions due to employee turnover. An additional 19% struggle to recruit and retain qualified staff, and 18% identify rising labor costs as a significant contributor to budget pressures. These workforce challenges reduce organizational capacity at the same time community needs continue to grow.

While the quantitative analysis illustrates the scope of these challenges, the qualitative findings provide critical context for understanding how these pressures are experienced across the human



services ecosystem. Stakeholders consistently described a system navigating complex structural tensions between accountability and flexibility, innovation and organizational stability, and financial sustainability and equitable access to services. Across focus groups and interviews, three challenges emerged repeatedly: declining and uncertain funding for essential services such as housing assistance, food security, and mental health programs; rising demand fueled by economic pressures, service gaps, and increasing mental health needs; and a workforce experiencing significant burnout and turnover.

Participants also described the consequences of administrative complexity for both providers and clients. Lengthy application processes for programs such as SNAP and Medicaid frequently discourage families from completing enrollment, while burdensome administrative requirements divert staff time away from direct service delivery. As one frontline worker observed, *"They'll live in their car... less painful than dealing with the system."* Despite these obstacles, organizations continue to adapt by building financial reserves, diversifying funding sources, developing social enterprises, and pursuing shared services and collaborative operating models.

Based on the quantitative and qualitative findings, this assessment presents a scalable investment framework designed to stabilize and strengthen Franklin County's human services ecosystem. The recommended annual investment ranges from approximately \$135 million to \$162 million, with an estimated first-year investment of \$48 million to \$65 million focused on the following strategic priorities:

- Multi-year stabilization funding
- Emergency stabilization funding
- Workforce wages and retention support
- Shared services and coordination infrastructure
- Sector innovation and equity initiatives

The projected return on investment is substantial. Sustained investment would help preserve essential services for more than 450,000 residents while generating an estimated \$3.20 to \$4.10 in economic value for every \$1 invested. In addition, proactive investment could prevent as much as \$920 million in lost community value over a three-year period by maintaining service continuity and avoiding costly disruptions across the sector.

Conversely, the consequences of inaction are significant. Without immediate intervention, an estimated 12,000 to 15,000 individuals could lose access to critical services each year, while 480 to 600 staff positions may be placed at risk. The resulting reduction in organizational capacity would indirectly affect an additional 18,000 to 22,000 community members, creating ripple effects across families, neighborhoods, and the broader regional economy.

Addressing these challenges will require coordinated action implemented over three phases. Immediate efforts should focus on establishing emergency stabilization funding, identifying



organizations at greatest financial risk, convening cross-sector stakeholders, and coordinating policy advocacy. Medium-term strategies include securing multi-year funding commitments, investing in workforce competitiveness, expanding shared infrastructure, and strengthening performance measurement systems. Long-term success depends on building diversified funding models, expanding regional capacity, supporting innovation, and integrating human services into broader economic development strategies.

The findings presented throughout this assessment lead to a clear conclusion: demand for human services is increasing faster than the sector's ability to respond. Sustained, coordinated investment is necessary to preserve organizational capacity, ensure continued access to essential services, and protect the long-term well-being of Franklin County residents. By acting now, community leaders have an opportunity to strengthen the resilience of the human services ecosystem, avoid significantly greater long-term costs, and position the sector for sustainable impact in the years ahead.

Part I: Quantitative Assessment — Franklin County Human Services Ecosystem

Section 1.1: Overview and Objectives

A Data-Driven Assessment of System Capacity and Risk

This strategic assessment examines Franklin County's human services ecosystem through a comprehensive quantitative analysis of 211 agencies serving more than 450,000 residents annually. Conducted by Cohear using survey data collected between February and March 2025, the assessment evaluates the sector's financial condition, operational capacity, workforce stability, and long-term sustainability. The analysis is designed to identify critical vulnerabilities, document emerging trends, and provide evidence-based guidance for strategic investment and system strengthening.

The assessment was developed with several core objectives in mind. First, it seeks to quantify the scale and scope of financial instability across the provider network. Second, it documents changes in service demand and the capacity constraints organizations are experiencing as community needs continue to grow. Third, it analyzes workforce challenges and the operational consequences of staff shortages, turnover, and compensation pressures. Finally, the assessment projects the potential consequences of continued funding erosion and outlines investment recommendations scaled to the needs of the overall system.

The findings reveal a sector facing substantial systemic risk. Approximately 69% of organizations—an estimated 145 agencies—report experiencing or anticipating financial instability. Given the scale of the population served by these organizations, the results suggest



that financial challenges within individual agencies have implications far beyond organizational budgets, potentially affecting service continuity for hundreds of thousands of Franklin County residents.

Section 1.2: System Landscape and Funding Overview

Limited Financial Cushion Across the Provider Network

The financial structure of Franklin County's human services ecosystem reveals significant vulnerability to policy shifts and funding instability. Revenue concentration from government sources varies widely across organizations, with agencies reporting differing levels of dependence on both federal and state funding. Some organizations receive less than 10% of their budgets from government sources, while others rely on government funding for more than 25% of their operating revenue. This variation creates uneven exposure to changes in public funding priorities and economic conditions.

The assessment also examined the role of COVID-era relief funding, including ARPA-related support, in organizational budgets. Overall, 76% of agencies reported that less than 10% of their budgets came from COVID-era relief funds. Among smaller organizations with annual budgets between \$0 and \$5 million, only 3% relied on relief funding for 50–75% of their budgets. Among large organizations with budgets exceeding \$25 million, 95% reported that relief funding represented less than 10% of their total budget.

These findings indicate that most providers did not build their operating models around temporary pandemic-related funding. However, the data also suggest that many organizations lack a substantial financial safety net. As a result, providers remain highly vulnerable to shifts in government policy, economic downturns, and funding disruptions, reinforcing the need for more predictable, long-term revenue sources.

The assessment identified several service categories that are particularly affected by federal funding volatility. Refugee services reported the highest level of impact, with 85% of providers indicating significant effects from federal funding freezes. Nutrition programs supported through SNAP and USDA funding followed at 70%, while 60% of community outreach programs reported substantial impacts. These findings highlight the disproportionate exposure of certain essential services to federal funding uncertainty.

Section 1.3: Financial and Operational Trends

Growing Demand and Declining Financial Flexibility

Nearly 70% of organizations reported ending the year in deficit or projecting a deficit, indicating that much of the sector is operating with limited financial margin. Agencies described a pattern



in which grant funding has either declined or remained flat, while increases in grant support have become comparatively rare. The result is a growing mismatch between rising community need and the financial resources available to respond.

Organizations also reported substantial increases in operating expenses over the past three years. Providers cited rising costs for salaries and benefits, insurance, technology, facilities, and regulatory compliance. At the same time, demand for services has continued to accelerate. Seventy-five percent of providers reported serving more people than they did three years ago, with average demand increasing by 15–20% across the sector.

This combination of rising demand and constrained resources has created a widening gap between community need and organizational capacity. Many agencies indicated that they do not currently have the resources necessary to meet the level of demand they are experiencing. Even organizations with strong management practices and efficient operations reported difficulty keeping pace with the growing need for services. The assessment suggests that, without additional investment and support, the sector will face increasing pressure in the form of staff burnout, longer waitlists, reduced program capacity, and delays in service delivery for families seeking assistance.

Section 1.4: Service Delivery and Program Efficiency

Three Converging Pressures on the Human Services System

The analysis identified three major trends that are occurring simultaneously across Franklin County's human services ecosystem. Together, these pressures create a level of strain that is greater than any single challenge alone.

The first trend is the significant increase in service demand. Agencies reported an average 15–20% rise in the number of individuals seeking support, driven by economic pressures, service gaps, and growing mental health needs across the community. The second trend is the contraction of available funding. Approximately 45% of organizations reported losing general grant funding, while 69% anticipate operating with a budget deficit. Many providers noted that multi-year funding commitments have increasingly been replaced by smaller, shorter-term awards, creating additional instability and contributing to program reductions and staffing disruptions. The third trend is the continued increase in operational costs. Rising expenses related to compensation, benefits, insurance, technology, and compliance have intensified financial pressures for organizations that were already operating with limited reserves.

Taken together, these trends point to a clear strategic conclusion: demand for human services is growing faster than providers' ability to respond. Sustained investment and coordinated support will be necessary to ensure that organizations can continue delivering essential services effectively and maintain capacity as community needs evolve.

Section 1.5: Workforce and Capacity Analysis

Workforce Capacity as a Critical Determinant of Service Delivery

The ability of Franklin County's human services organizations to meet growing community needs depends not only on financial resources, but also on the strength and stability of their workforce. Survey findings indicate that staffing challenges have become both a symptom of broader financial instability and a contributing factor to declining organizational capacity. As agencies work to serve increasing numbers of residents with limited resources, workforce pressures continue to affect recruitment, retention, and the continuity of services.

Organizations identified several persistent staffing challenges. More than one-quarter of respondents (27%) reported difficulty offering competitive wages, limiting their ability to attract and retain qualified employees in an increasingly competitive labor market. An additional 21% indicated that staff turnover has already disrupted service delivery, while 19% reported ongoing challenges recruiting and retaining experienced personnel. Rising labor costs also continue to strain organizational budgets, with 18% of agencies identifying compensation-related expenses as a major financial concern.

These challenges extend beyond individual organizations. Collectively, workforce pressures are estimated to affect more than 1,200 staff positions across Franklin County's human services sector. High turnover, prolonged vacancies, and increased workloads reduce organizational capacity, place additional demands on existing staff, and ultimately affect the consistency and quality of services available to community members.

The findings also demonstrate that investments in workforce stability have measurable organizational benefits. Improving employee compensation has the potential to increase staff retention by an estimated 15–20%, reducing turnover and strengthening institutional knowledge. Higher retention rates are projected to improve operational stability by approximately 12–18%, while more experienced and consistent teams can contribute to 10–15% improvements in service quality.

These findings underscore that workforce investments should not be viewed solely as personnel expenditures, but as strategic investments in organizational performance. Competitive compensation and effective retention strategies strengthen provider capacity, improve service continuity, and enable organizations to respond more effectively to increasing community demand. As financial pressures continue to intensify, supporting the human services workforce will be essential to sustaining both organizational resilience and high-quality service delivery throughout Franklin County.



Section 1.6: Key Findings and Implications

The Consequences of Continued Funding Erosion

The assessment examined how organizations anticipate responding if current funding challenges persist. The results indicate that many providers have already begun contingency planning, with most expecting to implement measures that would reduce organizational capacity and limit access to services. Because respondents could identify more than one anticipated response, the findings illustrate the range of strategies agencies may employ simultaneously to remain operational.

The most frequently identified strategy, selected by 26% of organizations, was modifying or reducing existing services by limiting program scope or decreasing the number of individuals served. Another 25% indicated they would pursue expanded partnerships to share resources and maintain essential services where possible. While collaboration represents an important adaptive strategy, many organizations noted that partnerships alone cannot offset widespread financial instability.

Additional responses point to significant reductions in system capacity. Eighteen percent of organizations anticipate limiting new client intake, increasing waitlists and reducing access for individuals seeking assistance. Sixteen percent expect staff layoffs, further weakening organizational capacity and increasing workloads for remaining employees. Fifteen percent indicated they may reduce or discontinue programs entirely, resulting in the loss of essential services for communities that rely on them.

Although these strategies may help organizations manage immediate financial pressures, their collective implementation would have far-reaching consequences for the broader human services ecosystem. If multiple providers simultaneously reduce services, limit enrollment, or eliminate programs, the effects are likely to extend well beyond individual agencies and create system-wide disruptions.

The projected impacts of continued funding erosion are substantial. An estimated 12,000 to 15,000 individuals could lose access to critical services each year, while approximately 480 to 600 staff positions may be placed at risk. The resulting reductions in organizational capacity are expected to affect an additional 18,000 to 22,000 community members through indirect impacts on families, caregivers, employers, and community support systems.

The assessment further suggests that these effects are unlikely to occur in isolation. Because organizations across the sector report similar financial pressures and contingency plans, simultaneous reductions in capacity could trigger cascading failures throughout the human services network. Such disruptions have the potential to affect more than 180,000 service recipients, result in an estimated \$580 million to \$920 million in lost community value over three



years, and require substantial future investments to rebuild organizational capacity once it has been lost.

These findings reinforce a central conclusion of this assessment: the costs of delaying investment extend well beyond the organizations themselves. Sustaining provider capacity today is likely to be considerably less costly than rebuilding services after widespread organizational contraction has occurred.

Section 1.7: Investment Plan for Stabilization and Long-Term Sustainability

The proposed investment strategy responds directly to three primary drivers identified throughout the assessment. First, widespread financial instability continues to threaten service continuity, with approximately 69% of agencies reporting current or anticipated budget deficits. Second, workforce challenges are affecting more than 1,200 staff positions across the sector, limiting organizational capacity and increasing operational strain. Third, demand for services continues to rise while many program areas remain underfunded, creating a widening gap between community need and available resources.

To address these challenges, the assessment recommends a comprehensive annual investment of approximately \$135 million to \$162 million, distributed across several strategic priorities. These investments are intended to strengthen both immediate service delivery and the long-term health of the human services ecosystem.

Multi-Year Stabilization Funding (\$75–90 million annually)

The largest portion of the recommended investment is dedicated to multi-year stabilization funding. Organizations consistently reported that short-term and unpredictable funding cycles make long-range planning difficult and contribute to ongoing financial instability. Multi-year commitments would provide agencies with the flexibility and predictability necessary to sustain essential services, retain staff, and respond effectively to changing community needs.

Emergency Stabilization Fund (\$10–12 million one-time investment)

In addition to long-term stabilization funding, the sector requires immediate resources to support organizations facing acute financial challenges. A dedicated emergency fund would help prevent sudden service disruptions, stabilize at-risk providers, and preserve critical community services during periods of funding uncertainty.

Workforce Investment and Development (\$30–35 million annually)

Workforce challenges emerged as one of the most significant threats to organizational capacity. Strategic investment in compensation, retention, professional development, and workforce



support would help organizations compete for talent, reduce turnover, and strengthen service delivery. Given the direct relationship between workforce stability and organizational performance, these investments are expected to generate benefits that extend throughout the entire service system.

Shared Infrastructure and Digital Systems (\$10–15 million annually)

Many organizations, particularly smaller providers, face similar operational challenges related to technology, administrative capacity, data management, and compliance requirements. Investments in shared infrastructure and digital systems would reduce duplication, improve efficiency, and enable organizations to devote a greater share of resources to direct service delivery.

Sector Innovation and Equity Initiatives (\$8–10 million annually)

The assessment also identifies a need for investments that support innovation, collaboration, and equitable service delivery. These resources would help organizations develop new approaches to emerging challenges, strengthen community partnerships, and expand access to services for populations disproportionately affected by existing barriers.

A Scaled First-Year Investment Strategy

While the full annual investment framework reflects long-term system needs, the assessment also outlines a more immediate first-year strategy focused on stabilization. Based on provider data and scaled modeling, the estimated first-year investment requirement ranges from approximately \$48 million to \$65 million and includes:

- \$31–41 million annually in multi-year stabilization funding
- \$5.5–8.2 million for a one-time emergency stabilization fund
- \$10.3–13.8 million for workforce wages and retention support
- \$1.4–2.1 million for shared services and coordination infrastructure

This phased approach allows stakeholders to address the most urgent risks while laying the foundation for longer-term investments and system transformation.

The Return on Investment

The proposed investment framework represents more than a financial commitment to individual organizations; it is an investment in the stability and well-being of Franklin County as a whole. Maintaining service continuity would preserve access to essential supports for more than 450,000 residents who rely on the human services ecosystem each year.



The economic benefits of investment are also significant. Analysis indicates that every dollar invested in the sector generates approximately \$3.20 to \$4.10 in economic value, reflecting both direct service impacts and broader community benefits. In addition, strategic investment can help avoid the substantial costs associated with organizational failure, service disruption, and system rebuilding.

Without intervention, Franklin County faces the possibility of widespread service reductions, workforce losses, and diminished organizational capacity. By contrast, proactive investment could prevent as much as \$920 million in lost community value over a three-year period, while preserving critical services and strengthening the long-term resilience of the sector.

Viewed through this lens, investment in the human services ecosystem is not simply a response to current challenges. It is a strategic decision to preserve community infrastructure, protect vulnerable residents, and position Franklin County for sustainable growth and impact in the years ahead.

Section 1.8: Strategic Action Plan

Building a Stronger and More Resilient Human Services Ecosystem

The assessment findings suggest that meaningful progress will require coordinated action across multiple sectors and time horizons. Stabilizing the human services ecosystem cannot be accomplished through isolated investments or short-term interventions alone. Instead, success depends on a shared commitment among nonprofit organizations, funders, government agencies, and community partners to strengthen both immediate capacity and long-term sustainability.

Four factors emerged as particularly important to successful implementation:

- Multi-jurisdictional political commitment
- Private-sector strategic engagement
- Data-driven accountability frameworks
- Collaborative resource utilization

Together, these elements provide the foundation for a phased implementation strategy that balances urgent stabilization needs with longer-term system transformation.

Phase One: Immediate Stabilization

The first phase focuses on addressing immediate risks to organizational and service continuity. Priority actions include establishing an emergency stabilization fund, identifying providers facing the greatest financial vulnerability, convening key stakeholders, and coordinating



advocacy efforts around stable and predictable funding. These actions are intended to reduce the likelihood of sudden service disruptions while creating a framework for broader collaboration.

Key implementation activities include:

- Emergency fund establishment (\$8–12 million)
- Provider risk assessment across 88 organizations
- Stakeholder coalition formation
- Policy advocacy coordination

Phase Two: Strategic Development

Once immediate risks have been addressed, attention can shift toward strengthening organizational capacity and improving system performance. This phase centers on securing multi-year funding commitments, investing in workforce competitiveness, expanding shared services, and developing performance measurement systems that support accountability and learning.

Key implementation activities include:

- Multi-year funding commitments through three- to five-year funding streams
- Workforce competitiveness investments through a \$15–20 million fund
- Shared services optimization
- Performance measurement system development

Phase Three: Sustainability Architecture

The final phase focuses on ensuring the long-term resilience of the human services ecosystem. Organizations and stakeholders would work to diversify funding sources, optimize regional capacity, expand innovation investments, and strengthen connections between human services and broader economic development efforts.

Key implementation activities include:

- Diversified funding models
- Regional capacity optimization
- Innovation investment programs
- Economic integration strategies

The Cost of Inaction

The strategic case for action is reinforced by the significant risks associated with maintaining the status quo. If current trends continue, Franklin County may experience cascading service



reductions affecting more than 180,000 recipients, accompanied by an estimated \$580 million to \$920 million in lost community value over three years. Rebuilding organizational capacity after widespread contraction would require substantial future investment and could leave lasting gaps in service availability.

For this reason, the choice facing stakeholders is not whether investment is necessary, but whether those investments occur proactively or in response to a deeper and more costly crisis. The evidence presented throughout this assessment strongly suggests that early, coordinated action offers the most effective path toward a stable, resilient, and sustainable human services ecosystem.

Part II: Qualitative Insights — Crisis and Opportunity

Section 2.1: Overview and Methodology

Understanding the Human Experience Behind the Data

While the quantitative findings provide a clear picture of the financial, operational, and workforce challenges facing Franklin County's human services ecosystem, they do not fully capture how these challenges are experienced by the individuals and organizations working within the system every day. To better understand these realities, this qualitative assessment explored the lived experiences, operational pressures, and strategic considerations shaping decision-making across the sector.

The qualitative component of the assessment was designed to complement and deepen the quantitative analysis. Through a series of focus groups and interviews, participants were invited to reflect on the challenges they face, the strategies they are using to adapt, and their perspectives on what is needed to strengthen the human services ecosystem moving forward.

Insights were gathered from four stakeholder groups:

- Frontline workers
- Nonprofit leaders
- Funders
- System partners

These conversations provided a valuable opportunity to examine how broader trends—including funding instability, workforce shortages, rising demand, and administrative complexity—affect organizations and the communities they serve. Participants discussed both immediate operational concerns and longer-term opportunities for system improvement, offering perspectives grounded in day-to-day experience.



The qualitative findings reveal a sector characterized by both strain and resilience. Participants consistently described organizations working under significant pressure while continuing to innovate, collaborate, and adapt in response to changing conditions. Their perspectives provide important context for understanding not only what is happening across the human services ecosystem, but why these trends are emerging and how they are shaping organizational behavior.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings create a more complete picture of Franklin County's human services landscape. The quantitative analysis identifies measurable trends and system-wide risks, while the qualitative assessment helps explain the underlying dynamics driving those outcomes. This integrated approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of both the challenges facing the sector and the opportunities available to strengthen it.

Section 2.2: Key Themes and Emerging Tensions

Navigating a System Under Pressure

Across focus groups and interviews, participants consistently described a human services ecosystem confronting multiple challenges simultaneously. Although stakeholders often approached these issues from different perspectives, there was broad agreement regarding the fundamental pressures shaping the sector. Three themes emerged repeatedly throughout the discussions: funding instability, rising demand for services, and a workforce experiencing significant strain.

Funding uncertainty was identified as one of the most immediate concerns. Participants described reductions in available resources and increasing pressure on safety-net programs that support housing, food security, mental health services, and other essential community needs. Many organizations reported difficulty planning for the future as funding commitments became less predictable and shorter in duration.

At the same time, stakeholders observed growing demand across nearly every area of service delivery. Participants attributed this increase to a combination of economic pressures, service gaps, housing instability, and rising mental health needs. As demand continues to increase, many organizations find themselves attempting to meet expanding community needs without corresponding increases in resources.

Workforce challenges further compound these pressures. Participants described widespread burnout, chronic understaffing, and growing difficulties retaining experienced employees. The emotional demands of frontline work, combined with increasing caseloads and limited organizational resources, have created significant strain throughout the sector.



Collectively, these challenges have created a sense that the human services ecosystem is operating at a critical juncture. Stakeholders consistently described organizations working to balance competing priorities while attempting to maintain service quality and organizational sustainability.

Balancing Stability, Accountability, and Innovation

Beyond the immediate challenges facing the sector, participants also identified a series of structural tensions that influence decision-making across the ecosystem. These tensions do not represent simple problems with straightforward solutions. Rather, they reflect competing priorities that organizations, funders, and policymakers must continually navigate.

One recurring theme involved the burden of duplicative accountability requirements. Participants described a funding environment in which organizations often report to multiple funders, each with distinct application processes, performance metrics, and reporting expectations. While accountability remains important, many stakeholders argued that excessive administrative requirements consume valuable staff time and reduce organizational capacity.

As one nonprofit leader explained:

"Small teams juggle dozens of funders... each with their own application platform and metrics."

Participants also highlighted the tension between innovation and organizational stability. While funders frequently encourage new approaches and creative solutions, many organizations lack the financial security necessary to experiment with new models. Leaders described situations in which maintaining existing programs and services takes precedence over pursuing innovation because organizational survival remains uncertain.

A funder reflected on this challenge, noting:

"Innovation is immediately rejected... we gave them 50 instead of 250 just to see what happens."

Questions of autonomy and oversight emerged as another recurring theme. Nonprofit leaders expressed a desire for greater flexibility in how resources are allocated, arguing that organizations closest to communities are often best positioned to determine how funds should be used. Participants suggested that highly restrictive funding requirements can undermine trust and limit organizations' ability to respond to emerging needs.

As one nonprofit leader stated:

"...they need to get out of the way and let us do the work."



Participants also discussed the ongoing challenge of balancing financial sustainability with organizational mission. Many organizations are exploring new revenue-generating strategies, including social enterprise models and earned-income opportunities. While these approaches may increase financial resilience, leaders expressed concern about maintaining equitable access to services and preserving organizational values.

One nonprofit leader summarized this tension by observing:

"We have to put on a new sales hat... but also not lose our values of serving everyone."

Three Strategic Tensions Shaping the Sector

The discussions revealed three broader tensions that continue to influence decision-making throughout the human services ecosystem.

Innovation versus Stability. Organizations recognize the need to develop new service models and diversify revenue sources. However, limited resources and conservative funding environments often make experimentation difficult. Many participants emphasized that innovation is unlikely to succeed without first establishing a stable operational foundation.

Speed versus Accountability. Stakeholders generally supported more flexible and trust-based approaches to funding, particularly during periods of uncertainty. At the same time, they acknowledged the need for transparency, measurable outcomes, and responsible stewardship of resources. The challenge lies in balancing responsiveness with accountability.

Equity versus Revenue. Participants described growing interest in social enterprise and alternative funding models. While these approaches can strengthen financial sustainability, organizations remain concerned about ensuring that services remain accessible to individuals regardless of income or ability to pay.

As one nonprofit leader noted:

"While we've diversified the risk, the same risk is hitting multiple parts of that funding pie."

Rather than viewing these tensions as barriers, participants suggested they should be understood as ongoing considerations that require thoughtful management. Successfully navigating these competing priorities will be essential to building a more resilient and sustainable human services ecosystem.

The qualitative findings indicate that organizations are not simply responding to isolated challenges. They are operating within a complex environment shaped by competing demands,



limited resources, and evolving expectations. Understanding these dynamics is critical for developing solutions that support both organizational stability and long-term community impact.

Section 2.3: Six Critical Challenges Shaping the Human Services Ecosystem

A Sector Responding to Compounding Pressures

The qualitative findings reveal a human services ecosystem confronting a series of interconnected challenges that extend beyond individual organizations. While stakeholders described a wide range of experiences, six recurring themes emerged consistently across interviews and focus groups. Together, these challenges illustrate how funding uncertainty, workforce strain, administrative complexity, and organizational adaptation are reshaping the sector's ability to meet community needs.

Although each challenge presents distinct operational concerns, participants emphasized that these issues rarely occur in isolation. Rather, they reinforce one another, creating a cycle of instability that affects providers, frontline staff, and the individuals who rely on essential services.

Funding Volatility Continues to Disrupt Organizational Stability

Participants consistently identified funding uncertainty as one of the most significant threats facing the sector. Many described a funding environment characterized by delayed decisions, shifting priorities, and shorter grant cycles that make long-term planning increasingly difficult. Federal funding changes were described as particularly disruptive, with impacts extending beyond direct recipients to community-based organizations that depend on pass-through funding and partnership arrangements.

Several participants noted that funding streams once characterized by multi-year commitments have increasingly been replaced by smaller, shorter-term awards. This shift has made it more difficult for organizations to maintain staffing levels, sustain programs, and invest in long-term organizational development.

As one funder explained:

"Everyone's just kind of in a wait-and-see mode... the flow of dollars is much slower than what we've experienced before."

Participants emphasized that funding instability affects more than organizational budgets. Uncertainty often delays hiring decisions, limits innovation, and forces organizations to devote substantial time and energy to securing resources rather than serving clients.



Workforce Strain Has Reached a Critical Point

Workforce challenges emerged as another defining concern throughout the discussions. Participants described widespread burnout, emotional exhaustion, and increasing workloads as organizations attempt to serve growing numbers of clients with limited staffing capacity.

Frontline workers spoke candidly about the emotional toll of supporting individuals facing complex challenges while simultaneously navigating their own financial and professional pressures. Several participants described a growing sense of moral injury, particularly when resource limitations prevent staff from providing the level of support they believe clients need.

One frontline worker summarized this experience by asking:

"How can I help you when I can't even help myself?"

Organizations also reported difficulties filling vacancies, retaining experienced employees, and providing competitive compensation. In some cases, vacancy freezes were implemented to preserve organizational budgets, resulting in heavier workloads for remaining staff and further contributing to burnout.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that workforce challenges are no longer isolated personnel concerns. They have become systemic issues that directly affect service quality, organizational stability, and long-term capacity.

Administrative Complexity Creates Barriers to Access

Stakeholders also highlighted the growing burden of bureaucracy within both service delivery and funding systems. Participants described lengthy application processes, complex eligibility requirements, and administrative procedures that often discourage individuals from accessing needed services.

Programs such as SNAP and Medicaid were frequently cited as examples of systems that have become difficult for many families to navigate. Participants reported that some individuals abandon applications altogether because the process is too time-consuming, confusing, or emotionally taxing.

Administrative burdens also affect service providers. Many participants noted that staff increasingly spend time completing paperwork, reporting requirements, and compliance activities that reduce the time available for direct client support.

The consequences of these barriers were described in stark terms by one frontline worker:

"They'll live in their car... less painful than dealing with the system."



Participants argued that reducing administrative complexity represents one of the most immediate opportunities for improving both service accessibility and organizational efficiency.

Organizations Continue to Adapt Despite Significant Constraints

Despite substantial challenges, participants consistently described organizations demonstrating creativity, resilience, and adaptability. Many providers have pursued new approaches to reduce risk and strengthen financial sustainability, including diversifying revenue sources, building reserve funds, and exploring earned-income opportunities.

Several participants highlighted co-location models, shared services arrangements, and collaborative partnerships as promising strategies for increasing efficiency and reducing operational costs. These approaches were often viewed as practical responses to a funding environment that requires organizations to do more with fewer resources.

However, stakeholders also noted that adaptation has limits. Many organizations are implementing these strategies while simultaneously responding to rising demand, staffing shortages, and financial uncertainty.

As one nonprofit leader explained:

"We were ~97% funded by one source... now our largest funder is 63% and that's Medicaid."

This shift reflects a broader trend toward diversification, but participants acknowledged that managing multiple funding streams introduces new complexities and administrative demands.

Funders Are Evolving, but Structural Constraints Remain

Funders participating in the assessment acknowledged many of the challenges identified by nonprofit organizations and described efforts to adapt their own practices in response. Participants discussed increasing use of unrestricted funding, simplified reporting requirements, and greater flexibility in grantmaking processes.

At the same time, funders noted that economic uncertainty and changing funding conditions have limited their willingness to support high-risk initiatives or make long-term commitments. Several participants described a growing emphasis on risk management, even as organizations seek greater flexibility and stability.

One funder summarized this reality by stating:

"No longer a multi-year grant maker... the landscape became too unpredictable."



These comments reflect a broader challenge facing the sector: many stakeholders recognize the need for change, but are operating within systems that constrain their ability to act differently.

Small Wins Continue to Sustain Commitment and Purpose

Amid discussions of financial instability, burnout, and organizational strain, participants also described the moments that continue to motivate them and reinforce their commitment to the work. Frontline workers, nonprofit leaders, and system partners frequently shared stories of meaningful client outcomes that serve as reminders of the importance of the human services sector.

These successes are often deeply personal and immediate—helping someone access medication, secure housing, obtain food assistance, or navigate a crisis. Participants described these moments as essential sources of motivation during periods of uncertainty and stress.

As one frontline worker reflected:

"Within 20 minutes... told her she'd get her meds... it's why we show up."

These stories highlight an important finding that emerged throughout the qualitative assessment: despite significant structural challenges, the sector remains anchored by individuals and organizations deeply committed to serving their communities.

From Individual Challenges to Systemic Risk

Taken together, these six challenges illustrate a sector under considerable strain yet actively working to adapt. Funding instability, workforce pressures, administrative complexity, and changing service demands are reshaping how organizations operate and deliver services. At the same time, providers, funders, and frontline workers continue to identify new strategies for sustaining impact and supporting community well-being.

The findings suggest that while individual organizations have demonstrated remarkable resilience, many of the challenges identified by participants are systemic in nature and cannot be addressed by providers alone. Long-term solutions will require coordinated action across nonprofit organizations, funders, government agencies, and community partners to strengthen the conditions that allow the human services ecosystem to thrive.

Section 2.4: Participant Perspectives and Opportunities for System Strengthening

Emerging Ideas for Alignment, Stability, and Collective Impact



While participants described significant challenges facing Franklin County's human services ecosystem, they also offered a range of ideas for strengthening the sector and improving long-term sustainability. Across stakeholder groups, conversations frequently shifted from describing current barriers to identifying opportunities for greater coordination, efficiency, and shared investment.

Many participants emphasized that no single organization, funder, or public agency can address the sector's challenges independently. Instead, they described a need for stronger collaboration across institutions and a more coordinated approach to funding, service delivery, workforce support, and policy advocacy. These recommendations reflect a shared belief that improving system performance requires strengthening the relationships and structures that connect organizations throughout the ecosystem.

Strengthening Collaboration and Collective Advocacy

One of the most frequently discussed opportunities involved creating stronger mechanisms for collective action across the nonprofit sector. Participants expressed interest in establishing a Nonprofit Civic Council that could serve as a forum for shared advocacy, policy engagement, and strategic coordination.

Stakeholders suggested that a formal structure for collaboration could help organizations align around common priorities, communicate more effectively with policymakers, and elevate sector-wide concerns that individual agencies may struggle to address independently. Participants emphasized that stronger collective advocacy could increase the visibility of the sector's contributions while helping secure more stable and sustainable investments.

As one nonprofit leader explained:

"We can't keep operating in silos. Coordination isn't a luxury—it's survival."

This perspective reflects a broader sentiment that collaboration should be viewed not as an optional enhancement, but as a necessary component of long-term sector resilience.

Reimagining Funding Structures

Participants also identified opportunities to improve the funding environment through reforms that reduce administrative burden and increase organizational flexibility. Several stakeholders expressed support for a tiered grantmaking approach that recognizes organizations with demonstrated track records and strong performance histories.

Under such a model, established organizations could receive streamlined application and reporting requirements, allowing them to devote more resources to service delivery rather than administrative compliance. Participants argued that reducing repetitive paperwork would create



efficiencies for both funders and providers while strengthening trust throughout the funding relationship.

Many stakeholders also emphasized the importance of increasing unrestricted and general operating support, noting that organizations require flexibility to respond effectively to changing community needs and evolving circumstances.

Supporting Client Stability Through Flexible Resources

A recurring theme throughout the discussions was the need for resources that allow organizations to respond quickly when clients face urgent challenges. Participants described situations in which relatively small financial interventions could prevent larger crises, yet existing funding structures often lack the flexibility to address immediate needs.

To address this gap, stakeholders proposed the creation of a rapid-response fund that could provide assistance during periods of financial instability or service disruption. Such a fund could help cover urgent expenses such as housing deposits, utility payments, transportation costs, or medical co-pays when traditional funding sources are unavailable or delayed.

Participants suggested that flexible emergency resources could improve client outcomes while reducing the need for more costly interventions later.

Investing in Workforce Well-Being

Given the prevalence of burnout and workforce strain identified throughout the assessment, many participants emphasized the importance of creating systems that support frontline staff. Stakeholders discussed the potential value of a dedicated support network that would provide peer mentoring, professional development opportunities, and mental health resources for employees across the sector.

Participants noted that while workforce investments often focus on recruitment and compensation, retaining experienced employees also requires attention to well-being, professional support, and organizational culture. Several stakeholders suggested that strengthening workforce support systems could improve retention while enhancing the quality and continuity of services.

Improving Operational Efficiency Through Shared Services

Participants consistently identified shared services as a promising strategy for increasing organizational efficiency and reducing administrative costs. Smaller organizations, in particular, described challenges related to finance, human resources, grant management, technology, and compliance functions that often require specialized expertise but may not justify dedicated staff positions.



To address these challenges, stakeholders proposed the creation of a shared services hub that would allow organizations to pool resources and access expertise collectively. Potential shared functions include financial management, human resources support, grant writing, data management, and other administrative services.

Participants suggested that a shared services model could reduce duplication, lower costs, and enable organizations to focus more of their resources on direct service delivery.

Addressing Rising Costs Through Collective Purchasing

In addition to shared administrative functions, participants discussed opportunities to reduce operating expenses through collaborative purchasing arrangements. Rising insurance costs emerged as a particular concern, with many organizations reporting increasing premiums and compliance-related expenses.

Stakeholders proposed joint purchasing initiatives that would allow organizations to leverage collective buying power when securing insurance coverage and other commonly purchased services. Participants suggested that these arrangements could help contain costs while improving access to resources that may otherwise be unaffordable for smaller providers.

Simplifying Systems and Reducing Administrative Burden

Frustration with administrative complexity emerged repeatedly throughout the assessment, leading many participants to advocate for broader efforts to simplify eligibility requirements, reporting systems, and regulatory processes.

Several stakeholders proposed conducting a comprehensive policy audit to identify opportunities for reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and streamlining access to services. Participants argued that simplifying procedures would benefit both providers and clients by reducing delays, improving accessibility, and allowing organizations to devote more time to direct service delivery.

These recommendations align closely with earlier findings regarding the challenges created by complex application processes and duplicative reporting requirements.

Strengthening Alignment Between Funders and Providers

Participants also emphasized the importance of creating more structured opportunities for communication and collaboration between funders and service providers. Several stakeholders proposed establishing a funder-grantee council that could serve as a venue for jointly developing reporting standards, improving grantmaking practices, and identifying opportunities for increased flexibility.



Many participants suggested that stronger partnerships between funders and providers could help reduce misunderstandings, improve accountability processes, and create funding models that better reflect the realities of service delivery.

The goal, participants emphasized, is not to eliminate accountability, but to ensure that accountability systems support rather than hinder organizational effectiveness.

Defining Success for the Future

When asked what meaningful progress would look like, participants consistently emphasized stability, coordination, and simplicity. Stakeholders envisioned a future in which organizations spend less time navigating fragmented systems and more time serving their communities.

At the system level, participants described success as a more coordinated funding environment, stronger alignment among funders and public agencies, and reduced duplication across organizations. Many expressed a desire for shared approaches to planning, reporting, and impact measurement that would allow organizations to work toward common goals rather than competing priorities.

Participants also identified several workforce and funding outcomes that would signal meaningful progress, including stronger staff retention, more predictable and flexible funding, adequate operating support, and impact measures that reflect both quantitative outcomes and lived experience.

As one nonprofit leader observed:

"If we're not at the table, that's a problem. We need sustainable funding as a sector."

Across all stakeholder groups, a common vision emerged: a human services ecosystem built on stability, flexibility, trust, and genuine partnership. Participants repeatedly emphasized that the challenges facing the sector require greater connection rather than competition and stronger collaboration rather than increased compliance.

The perspectives shared throughout this assessment suggest that many of the solutions already exist within the sector itself. The challenge moving forward is creating the structures, relationships, and investments necessary to turn these ideas into coordinated action.

Section 2.5: Recommendations and Implementation Strategies

Moving from Assessment to Action



The findings presented throughout this assessment point to a clear conclusion: the challenges facing Franklin County's human services ecosystem are systemic in nature and require coordinated, cross-sector solutions. While individual organizations have demonstrated considerable resilience and adaptability, many of the barriers identified by participants—including funding instability, workforce strain, administrative complexity, and fragmented service systems—cannot be addressed by providers alone.

The recommendations that emerged from stakeholder conversations are intended to strengthen both immediate service delivery and long-term system sustainability. Collectively, they reflect a vision for a more coordinated, responsive, and resilient human services ecosystem capable of meeting current needs while adapting to future challenges.

Immediate Stabilization Priorities

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of addressing urgent workforce, client, and operational challenges before pursuing broader system transformation. Several recommendations focused on creating mechanisms that can provide immediate support to organizations, staff, and community members experiencing the effects of ongoing instability.

Frontline Support Network

Workforce burnout emerged as one of the most persistent concerns throughout the assessment. To address this challenge, participants proposed establishing a Frontline Support Network designed to provide peer mentoring, crisis debriefing opportunities, and mental health resources for human services professionals.

Stakeholders emphasized that workforce sustainability depends not only on compensation, but also on creating environments that support employee well-being and professional resilience. A dedicated support network could help reduce turnover, strengthen retention, and improve organizational stability across the sector.

Rapid-Response Client Fund

Participants also identified a need for flexible resources that can be deployed quickly when individuals and families encounter urgent financial challenges. A Rapid-Response Client Fund would provide short-term assistance for expenses such as housing deposits, utility payments, transportation needs, and medical co-pays during periods when traditional funding sources are unavailable or delayed.

Stakeholders noted that relatively small interventions can often prevent larger crises, making flexible emergency funding an important tool for improving client stability and reducing long-term service costs.



Policy Simplification Initiative

Administrative complexity was consistently identified as a barrier to both service access and organizational effectiveness. Participants recommended a coordinated effort to review and streamline eligibility requirements, reporting procedures, and application processes associated with major programs such as SNAP, Medicaid, and housing assistance.

Simplifying these systems would reduce burdens on providers while making it easier for residents to access the services they need. Participants emphasized that reducing administrative barriers represents one of the most immediate opportunities to improve system performance without requiring substantial new infrastructure.

Rebuilding and Strengthening System Capacity

Beyond immediate stabilization efforts, participants identified several strategies for strengthening organizational capacity and improving coordination across the human services ecosystem.

Interagency Referral Protocols

Stakeholders frequently described challenges associated with fragmented service delivery and disconnected referral pathways. To address these issues, participants recommended developing coordinated referral protocols that facilitate seamless connections among housing, healthcare, workforce development, and other service systems.

Strengthening referral pathways would help reduce service gaps, improve client experiences, and ensure that individuals receive timely support across multiple areas of need. Participants emphasized that effective coordination is particularly important for clients navigating complex circumstances that require assistance from multiple organizations.

Tiered Grant Certification

Many participants advocated for funding models that recognize organizational performance and reduce administrative burden for providers with demonstrated track records of success. A Tiered Grant Certification framework would allow trusted organizations to access streamlined application and reporting processes while maintaining appropriate accountability standards.

Stakeholders suggested that this approach could improve efficiency for both funders and providers, allowing organizations to devote more resources to service delivery rather than repetitive administrative requirements.

Shared Services Hub



Participants consistently identified shared services as a practical strategy for increasing organizational efficiency and reducing operational costs. A Shared Services Hub could provide access to specialized expertise in areas such as finance, human resources, grant writing, technology, and compliance.

By pooling resources across organizations, the hub would help smaller providers access capabilities that might otherwise be financially out of reach while reducing duplication across the sector. Participants viewed shared services as an opportunity to strengthen organizational capacity without requiring each agency to independently build administrative infrastructure.

Building Long-Term Sustainability

While immediate stabilization and capacity-building efforts are critical, participants emphasized that long-term sustainability will require structural changes that improve financial resilience, strengthen partnerships, and support coordinated decision-making across the sector.

Joint Purchasing Initiatives

Rising insurance costs and operational expenses were frequently cited as growing financial pressures. Participants proposed creating collaborative purchasing arrangements that allow organizations to leverage collective buying power when securing insurance coverage and other commonly purchased services.

Potential areas for joint purchasing include liability insurance, cyber insurance, automobile coverage, and directors and officers insurance. Stakeholders suggested that coordinated purchasing could generate significant cost savings while reducing administrative burden for participating organizations.

Funder-Grantee Advisory Council

To strengthen alignment between funding organizations and service providers, participants recommended establishing a Funder-Grantee Advisory Council. This body would create opportunities for collaborative problem-solving and shared decision-making regarding grantmaking practices, reporting standards, and funding priorities.

Stakeholders emphasized that stronger communication between funders and providers can help build trust, improve accountability systems, and ensure that funding structures better reflect the realities of service delivery. Participants viewed the council as an important mechanism for fostering ongoing dialogue and continuous improvement across the sector.

Civic Council Integration



Participants also advocated for greater nonprofit representation in public-sector planning and decision-making processes. Specifically, stakeholders recommended integrating nonprofit leaders into municipal budget discussions, policy committees, and broader community planning efforts.

This approach would help ensure that organizations directly engaged in service delivery have opportunities to inform policy decisions affecting the communities they serve. Participants argued that stronger nonprofit participation in civic processes would improve coordination, strengthen public investment strategies, and create a more inclusive approach to addressing community needs.

A Framework for Collective Action

Taken together, these recommendations reflect a shared understanding that sustainable progress requires both immediate intervention and long-term system reform. The proposals outlined by participants are designed to address urgent challenges while simultaneously building the infrastructure, partnerships, and governance structures necessary for future success.

Importantly, these recommendations are not intended to function as isolated initiatives. Rather, they form an interconnected framework for strengthening the human services ecosystem through greater coordination, increased flexibility, reduced administrative burden, and sustained investment in organizational and workforce capacity.

The assessment suggests that meaningful change will depend on continued collaboration among nonprofit organizations, funders, government agencies, and community stakeholders. While individual recommendations address specific challenges, their collective impact lies in creating a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable system capable of supporting both providers and the residents who depend on them.

Section 2.6: Indicators of Success and the Path Forward

Measuring Progress Toward a Stronger Human Services Ecosystem

The recommendations outlined in this assessment are intended not only to address immediate challenges, but also to create measurable improvements in organizational stability, service delivery, workforce sustainability, and system coordination. Participants emphasized that long-term success should be evaluated through outcomes that reflect both operational performance and the lived experiences of providers, staff, and community members.

Across stakeholder groups, there was broad agreement that meaningful progress would be characterized by a more stable, coordinated, and responsive human services ecosystem. While



specific metrics may vary across organizations and service areas, participants identified several key indicators that can help assess whether investments and reforms are producing the intended results.

Workforce Stability and Retention

One of the clearest indicators of progress will be improvements in workforce retention and well-being. Throughout the assessment, participants described turnover, burnout, and staffing shortages as major barriers to organizational effectiveness. As a result, stakeholders emphasized that successful implementation should lead to stronger workforce stability and reduced employee attrition.

Investments in compensation, professional support, and workforce development are expected to improve retention rates while strengthening organizational capacity. More stable staffing structures would allow organizations to preserve institutional knowledge, reduce recruitment costs, and maintain continuity of care for clients.

Over time, improvements in workforce stability should contribute to stronger service quality, greater operational consistency, and enhanced organizational resilience.

Faster and More Equitable Access to Services

Participants also emphasized the importance of improving access to services for community members. Many stakeholders described existing systems as overly complex and difficult to navigate, often resulting in delays, abandoned applications, and unmet needs.

Progress in this area would be reflected through streamlined processes, shorter wait times, and reduced barriers to accessing benefits and support services. Simplifying eligibility requirements, reducing administrative burdens, and improving coordination among providers should help individuals and families connect with needed resources more quickly and efficiently.

Participants suggested that a more responsive system would not only improve client outcomes but also reduce strain on organizations by minimizing delays and duplication.

Increased Time for Direct Service Delivery

A recurring theme throughout the assessment was the significant amount of staff time devoted to administrative tasks, reporting requirements, and compliance activities. Stakeholders consistently expressed a desire to spend more time working directly with clients and less time navigating bureaucratic processes.

Successful implementation of the recommendations outlined in this report should lead to measurable reductions in administrative burden. Streamlined reporting systems, shared



infrastructure, and simplified processes would allow staff to dedicate a greater portion of their time to service delivery, client support, and community engagement.

Participants viewed this shift as a critical indicator of system improvement, as it reflects both increased efficiency and stronger alignment between organizational resources and community needs.

Greater Operational Efficiency

Several recommendations focus on reducing costs and improving organizational efficiency through collaboration and shared infrastructure. Participants identified opportunities to contain rising expenses through joint purchasing arrangements, shared services models, and coordinated administrative functions.

Indicators of success in this area may include lower insurance costs, reduced administrative overhead, increased utilization of shared resources, and improved operational performance across participating organizations. These efficiencies would allow providers to maximize available resources while strengthening organizational sustainability.

Participants emphasized that operational improvements should ultimately support—not replace—the core mission of service delivery. Efficiency gains are most meaningful when they create additional capacity to serve communities effectively.

Improved Financial Sustainability

Long-term financial stability emerged as one of the most important goals identified throughout the assessment. Participants consistently described the challenges associated with short-term funding cycles, restricted grants, and unpredictable revenue streams.

Progress toward financial sustainability would be reflected through several indicators, including increased access to unrestricted funding, greater availability of multi-year funding commitments, and more diversified revenue portfolios across organizations. These conditions would allow providers to engage in long-range planning, make strategic investments, and respond more effectively to changing community needs.

Participants noted that financial sustainability is not simply a measure of organizational health; it is a prerequisite for maintaining reliable services and supporting a stable workforce.

Stronger System Integration and Coordination

The assessment repeatedly identified fragmentation as a challenge affecting both organizations and clients. As a result, stakeholders emphasized that stronger coordination across the ecosystem should be viewed as a key measure of success.



Indicators of improved integration may include more effective referral pathways, increased collaboration among providers, coordinated advocacy efforts, and greater alignment among funders, nonprofits, and public agencies. Participants also highlighted the importance of shared learning and knowledge exchange as mechanisms for accelerating innovation and spreading effective practices throughout the sector.

As one funder observed:

"... interconnectedness is more [necessary] than ever before."

This perspective reflects a broader recognition that many of the challenges facing the sector require collective solutions rather than isolated organizational responses.

From Insight to Collective Action

The findings presented throughout this assessment reveal a sector confronting significant challenges but also possessing substantial expertise, commitment, and capacity for innovation. Participants consistently emphasized that the future of Franklin County's human services ecosystem depends on the ability of stakeholders to move beyond fragmented responses and work toward shared goals.

The path forward requires sustained collaboration among nonprofit organizations, funders, policymakers, and community partners. While individual organizations will continue to play a critical role in addressing community needs, many of the most pressing challenges identified in this assessment can only be resolved through coordinated action and shared investment.

As stakeholders consider the quantitative and qualitative findings together, an important point of convergence emerges: both data and lived experience point toward the need for greater stability, stronger partnerships, and more intentional investment in the systems that support service delivery.

Ultimately, the strength of Franklin County's human services ecosystem depends on the people and organizations that continue to serve their communities despite significant obstacles. The recommendations and opportunities outlined throughout this report provide a roadmap for supporting those efforts and creating the conditions necessary for long-term success.

As one frontline worker reflected:

"We're all trying to do good work. We just need the systems to let us do it."

This assessment suggests that the challenge ahead is not identifying what needs to change. Rather, it is building the collective commitment necessary to turn insight into action and ensure



that the human services ecosystem remains capable of meeting the needs of Franklin County's residents for years to come.

Conclusion

A Call for Strategic Investment and Collective Action

This assessment demonstrates that Franklin County's human services ecosystem is operating at a critical inflection point. Across both the quantitative and qualitative findings, a consistent picture emerges: organizations are being asked to meet growing community needs while navigating increasing financial pressure, workforce challenges, and operational constraints. Although providers continue to demonstrate resilience and innovation, the demands placed on the sector are rising faster than its capacity to respond.

The quantitative analysis highlights the scale of these challenges. Nearly 70% of agencies report current or anticipated financial instability, while 75% have experienced increased demand for services. Rising operational costs, shrinking funding resources, and workforce pressures have created conditions that threaten the long-term sustainability of many organizations. Without intervention, thousands of residents could lose access to critical services, hundreds of workforce positions may be placed at risk, and the broader community could experience substantial social and economic consequences.

The qualitative findings provide important context for understanding these trends. Stakeholders described a system strained by funding uncertainty, administrative complexity, workforce burnout, and fragmented coordination. At the same time, they highlighted the extraordinary commitment of organizations and frontline staff who continue to adapt, collaborate, and serve their communities despite significant obstacles. Participants also identified practical, actionable strategies for strengthening the sector, including increased funding flexibility, workforce support, shared infrastructure, simplified systems, and stronger cross-sector partnerships.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the challenges facing Franklin County's human services ecosystem are not simply organizational concerns. They represent broader community risks with implications for housing stability, food security, healthcare access, workforce participation, and overall quality of life. The strength of the human services sector is deeply connected to the well-being of the county as a whole.

The investment framework presented in this report offers a path forward. Grounded in provider data and stakeholder experience, the recommendations prioritize immediate stabilization while laying the foundation for long-term sustainability. Strategic investments in organizational stability, workforce development, shared infrastructure, and innovation have the potential to



preserve essential services, strengthen community outcomes, and generate substantial social and economic returns. Just as importantly, these investments can help create a system that is better positioned to respond to future challenges and opportunities.

However, financial resources alone will not be sufficient. Long-term success will depend on sustained collaboration among nonprofit organizations, funders, government agencies, business leaders, and community stakeholders. The findings of this assessment underscore the importance of moving beyond fragmented approaches and toward a shared vision for the future of the human services ecosystem. Achieving that vision will require trust, coordination, and a collective commitment to strengthening the systems that support both providers and the communities they serve.

Ultimately, Franklin County possesses many of the assets necessary to address the challenges identified in this report. The sector is rich with expertise, dedicated professionals, strong community organizations, and stakeholders who are committed to improving outcomes for residents. The opportunity now is to align those assets around a coordinated strategy that supports stability, fosters innovation, and strengthens long-term resilience.

The choice facing the community is not whether change will occur, but whether change will be driven by proactive investment and strategic planning or by the consequences of continued strain and service erosion. The evidence presented throughout this assessment strongly supports the former. By acting now, Franklin County can strengthen its human services ecosystem, protect essential community resources, and ensure that organizations remain equipped to meet the needs of residents today and in the years ahead.

The message shared by participants throughout this assessment is clear: the sector does not lack commitment, expertise, or vision. What is needed is a system that enables organizations to do their work effectively, sustainably, and collaboratively. The path forward requires investment, partnership, and coordinated action—but the potential benefits for the community are substantial and enduring.