

Beyond Compliance: Transforming Community LTSS for the Next Generation

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LTSS systems were not designed to operate as integrated systems. They were built over time through separate programs, funding sources, and administrative structures. As a result, transformation efforts today require more than improving individual programs. They require states to rethink how LTSS is delivered across agencies, providers, and service settings.

As demand for community long-term services and supports (LTSS) grows, so do expectations for how older adults, people with disabilities, and their families experience those programs. States are also facing a critical question: How can they build or maintain sustainable systems that improve outcomes for older adults and people with disabilities while maintaining quality, accountability, and fiscal responsibility?

The answer is more than improving programs individually. States and the people they serve are recognizing that meaningful progress requires comprehensive community LTSS transformation that addresses policy, operations, workforce, quality oversight, and service delivery in a coordinated way. Accomplishing this requires coordination across multiple agencies and funding streams.

The Drivers of LTSS Transformation

Across the country, states are navigating significant challenges:

- Increased demand for community-based supports
- Workforce shortages affecting access to services
- Growing expectations for person-centered service delivery
- Increased focus on quality measurement and outcomes
- Fiscal pressures that require effective stewardship of public resources

The interconnectedness of these challenges makes overcoming them more difficult for states. A capable workforce is required to improve service access. Effective oversight is necessary to strengthen quality. Person-centered policies and operational practices are the foundation for true community integration.

To achieve lasting results and change, states are pursuing holistic transformation strategies that align policies, processes, workforce investments, and quality oversight efforts.

It's More than Compliance

For decades, much of the effort to improve LTSS systems was focused mostly on regulatory compliance. As it should. Compliance is critical for continued funding and operation of LTSS programs. But today, leading states are looking at more than just compliance. They are looking to transform their LTSS by:

- Streamlining the process to access the right community-based services
- Promoting individual choice and self-direction
- Supporting community integration
- Strengthening provider networks
- Improving workforce capacity
- Measuring meaningful quality outcomes
- Ensuring long-term program sustainability

While compliance is a foundation, transformation focuses on creating systems that work better for older adults, people with disabilities, and their families.

Workforce Capacity is a Priority for Transformation

Workforce capacity is a persistently limiting factor for sustainability of community LTSS systems. Although wages have increased since the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, many direct care professionals continue to earn wages lower than their region's living wage and often lack access to benefits such as paid leave, health insurance, and career advancement opportunities. These challenges contribute to persistent vacancy rates and turnover, increasing provider costs, disrupting continuity of care, and limiting access to services.ⁱ

States increasingly recognize that workforce capacity is directly connected to quality, access, and system sustainability. Demand for LTSS continues to grow as the population ages and more individuals choose to live in community settings. At the same time, providers are competing for workers in an increasingly constrained labor market. Federal immigration policy changes, workforce participation trends, further complicate efforts to recruit and retain qualified staff.ⁱⁱ

Leading states are moving beyond short-term recruitment initiatives and investing in comprehensive workforce strategies. These efforts include development of portable and standardized credentials, competency-based training models, apprenticeship programs, and specialization opportunities in areas such as dementia care, behavioral health, care coordination, and complex support needs. When aligned and leveraged broadly across a state or region, these system-level strategies can strengthen workforce retention while helping providers meet evolving service demands. Many LTSS workforce structures were developed within individual programs, funding streams, and regulatory frameworks. As demand increases, these siloed approaches can create unnecessary barriers to workforce mobility, career development, and system responsiveness. Successful transformation requires states to take a comprehensive view of workforce needs across agencies, programs, and service settings. This includes aligning core competencies, training standards, supervision requirements, and credentialing expectations for direct support professionals, care coordinators, case managers, and frontline supervisors.

Building a sustainable LTSS workforce is no longer solely a provider challenge. It is a system transformation imperative. States that proactively align workforce policies, investments, and professional development strategies will be better positioned to ensure access to high-quality services for future generations.

Quality Cannot Be Forgotten

Quality is not just about compliance. While compliance activities help ensure programs meet requirements, true quality transformation focuses on whether people are achieving meaningful outcomes and receiving the supports they need to live the lives of their choosing.

As community LTSS systems evolve, states are increasingly moving beyond compliance monitoring and investing in comprehensive quality management systems. Effective quality systems provide agencies, providers, and stakeholders with the tools, training, technology, and information needed to identify trends, measure performance, and continually improve services.ⁱⁱⁱ Data collection alone is not enough. States must be able to analyze information across programs, identify areas for improvement, and work collaboratively with providers, individuals, families, advocates, and other partners to implement meaningful change.

In many states, quality expectations, measures, and oversight activities vary across programs and agencies. LTSS transformation provides an opportunity to align these efforts and create a more coordinated approach to improving outcomes across the system.

Quality improvement is also a shared responsibility. While direct support professionals, case managers, and provider organizations play a critical role in supporting individuals, quality outcomes are influenced by many stakeholders. State agencies, advocates, associations, providers, individuals, and families all contribute to creating systems that promote health, welfare, independence, and community integration.

Successful LTSS transformation efforts recognize that quality is not a separate initiative. It is woven throughout policy development, service delivery, workforce development, oversight activities, and person-centered practices.

Person-Centeredness is Foundational to Improving Outcomes

Person-centered practices must be at the heart of all LTSS transformation efforts. People receiving community LTSS want the same things as everyone else: independence, choice, meaningful relationships, and the ability to participate in their communities. Person-centered systems know that services should be designed and delivered around individual goals and preferences, not administrative processes.^{iv}

LTSS systems are often designed around programs, funding streams, or administrative structures. Individuals, however, experience services differently. A person may receive services through multiple programs throughout their lifetime and expect consistency regardless of administrative boundaries. Transformation efforts should focus on creating more coordinated and seamless experiences across programs, agencies, and service settings.^v

This means reviewing current service definitions and realizing that today's person receiving LTSS expects something different than those who came before them. States must also look across their programs to identify areas for streamlining and consistency, as a person does not enter into one LTSS program and remain in that program throughout their life.

States that have successfully implemented person-centered approaches across the system often see improvements in:

- Meaningful community integration
- Individual satisfaction
- Service effectiveness
- Care coordination
- Stakeholder engagement

Person-centered thinking and practices are a guiding principle that informs program design, workforce development, quality management, and service delivery. They require a shift in thinking, not just an implementation of policies and tools.

Transformation Requires Implementation

One of the most important lessons from successful LTSS transformation efforts is that transformation requires more than planning.

Long-lasting change requires the implementation of continuous improvement structures, including stakeholder engagement, implementation support, workforce development, operational review and redesign, and ongoing monitoring of performance. Combining strategic vision with sustainable practical implementation approaches is the most beneficial for states.

Transformation efforts are most successful when they bring policy expertise, operational knowledge, stakeholder perspectives, and data-driven decision-making together so systems are created that are effective and sustainable.

Modern Infrastructure Supports Transformation

Many LTSS systems have evolved over decades through separate funding streams, programs, and administrative structures. As a result, states often face challenges coordinating services, sharing data, and creating consistent experiences for individuals and families.^{vi}

This fragmentation has led to:

- Aging IT systems
- Fragmented data
- Multiple assessment processes
- Multiple agencies (state and external)
- Inconsistent policies
- Need for integrated oversight

Successful LTSS transformation efforts have identified ways in which to overcome this fragmentation by building and reinforcing partnerships with all the agencies involved. This work requires agencies and partners to come together around shared goals and jointly address system challenges. They are finding innovative ways to braid and blend funding, create consistency across programs, and ultimately create a more seamless experience for individuals and their families.

The Future of LTSS

Community LTSS systems are at a crossroads. Growing demand, continued workforce challenges, evolving expectations, and increased focus on outcomes are forcing states to rethink how services are designed and delivered.

Successful transformation recognizes that no single initiative will address these challenges. Long-lasting change requires coordinated investments in workforce development, quality management, person-centered practices, operational efficiency, and system infrastructure. This coordination cannot occur without cross-agency communication and collaboration.

By taking a comprehensive approach to LTSS transformation, states can create systems that are more responsive, sustainable, and effective for the people who rely on them today and in the future.

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Endnotes

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