



Focus on the Future

Guest Predictions: Robert Chirles

Guest Predictions is a regular feature in which we ask leaders in a number of professions questions that affect us all.

Robert J. Chirles is the Director of the Loudoun County, Virginia, Department of Family Services. He was formerly the Commissioner of the Putnam County, New York, Department of Social Services and Mental Health. He has served as Project Coordinator for the United Way of Westchester County, New York, and Director of the Archdiocese of New York Drug Abuse Prevention Program.

Q: What changes in your professional environment in the past 3-5 years have you found to be the most beneficial?

A: I think the increased use of outcome data to help make decisions about human services programs has contributed to greater credibility about the effectiveness of various initiatives. The emphasis on best practices and a more disciplined evaluation of outcomes has begun to drive more and better decisions about providing human services overall. There is a growing awareness that programs can be tested for effectiveness and that decision makers and budget managers can evaluate the positive effects of human services programs and make a better case for community investment in those services.

Q: What changes have been the most troubling to you?

A: At the same time as data-based decision making is developing, the human services agenda in the US is faced with the simultaneous challenges of constricting fiscal resources and increasing demand from people who have never before been forced to reach out to government for basic services. The current economic crisis has brought about a sense of urgency regarding our health care system and a growing recognition of the chasm between the poor and working poor and those at the high end of the income spectrum in the USA.

The cost of housing has exceeded the ability of many people at the middle and lower economic range to afford housing, especially near their work, which has impacted on commuter patterns in several metropolitan areas throughout the country, particularly in the Washington DC area. Lack of affordable housing is the major cause of homelessness in the US and while some new initiatives, such as "housing first", may hold promise, efforts to provide affordable housing appear to be stalling.

Q: How will globalization (e.g. the emergence of new global powers, such as China and India) affect your professional area in the near term?

A: Issues associated with immigration have become a prominent theme within the public and private human services arena. As immigrants concentrate in specific areas of the US, local communities are faced increasingly with new language, cultural, social and economic challenges. The debate about immigration status has created difficulties for agencies whose mission is to serve those in need while trying to comply with legal and community expectations. On the employment side, the outsourcing of jobs abroad has a direct impact on local government economic development initiatives and on stateside employment opportunities.

As Americans continue to take advantage of more liberal adoption opportunities overseas, some local child welfare agencies are experiencing an increase in calls for assistance from parents when foreign adoptions fail. Some adoption agencies that conduct business overseas are lax in their screening and preparation of adoptive parents, lax in gathering and sharing the adoptive children's circumstances, as well as their physical and emotional histories. Consequently, some parents find that, after a few years, their child presents difficulties that the parents were completely unprepared to handle and their love for the child isn't enough to get them through the crisis. Local child welfare agencies are faced with the challenge and the cost of providing services late in the adoption process.

Q: What significant challenges might be anticipated in your professional area in the next few years?

A: In addition to current fiscal constraints and the rising number of people seeking services, retirements in the human services field are projected to occur at record levels over the next several years, as boomers leave the workforce. Years of knowledge, depth of experience and skill sets developed over the span of a career will disappear and newer professionals will be faced with a steeper learning curve and fewer experienced mentors as budgets constrict.

While retirements may open some opportunities for new professionals, the constriction of government and non-profit budgets due to the impact of the global economic crisis will hinder the recruitment of well educated, talented and well prepared human services professionals, resulting in a significant investment needed in training of staff with, perhaps, a move to reliance more on paraprofessionals in some areas.

Q: What are the greatest challenges confronting young professionals in Western culture today?

A: The reduced ability to acquire a higher education due to tuition increases, the loss of job opportunities, the lack of affordable housing, and the lack of health care coverage will certainly affect young professionals in the USA. On a larger scale, the once booming economies of other nations no longer provide the opportunities to begin and maintain a successful career, to acquire the training and professional skills necessary in a global economy. Various professions may suffer the loss of talent and knowledge so essential to maintain the momentum of building balanced communities and for society's advancement in general.