

Enabling the social service workforce



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Introduction

In a world marked by its diversity and complexity, the role of the social service workforce has emerged as a beacon of hope and assistance for those in need. Comprising a diverse array of professionals, including youth workers, social educators, protection officers, social workers, psychologists, counselors, and case managers, this workforce collectively embodies a commitment to alleviating challenges and fostering positive change within their communities. At its core, the social service workforce is a dynamic tapestry of individuals who dedicate their skills and empathy to serving various beneficiary groups. From vulnerable children to the elderly, from those affected by mental health issues to survivors of abuse, these professionals engage in a multitude of roles to deliver services that touch lives in profound ways. Vulnerable groups are defined as groups of people considered to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion because of physical disabilities, age factors, ethnic origins, lack of housing, or substance abuse. Whether through counseling, advocacy, intervention, or support, their actions reverberate far beyond their immediate interactions.

The importance of the social service workforce transcends its professional diversity. This collective effort forms a vital foundation for the well-being of societies worldwide. These professionals serve as catalysts for positive change, often bridging gaps in care and amplifying the voices of the marginalized. Their role extends beyond addressing immediate needs; they contribute to shaping a more inclusive and equitable future for all.

Governments place significant emphasis on ensuring the safety and well-being of their citizens, a commitment that extends to protecting vulnerable populations such as children and the elderly. Additionally, they strive to provide assistance to individuals facing unemployment, homelessness, substance abuse, and mental health challenges, considering these as crucial missions within civilized societies. At the

forefront of public sector social service delivery, social workers play a pivotal role in facilitating access to resources and support for individuals, families, and communities grasping the complex personal and societal issues.

The social service workforce plays a crucial role not only in social care but also significantly extends its impact into the realms of health and education. This intersection with the health and education sectors is a critical link that plays a fundamental role in fostering holistic well-being and societal advancement. The relationship between these sectors forms the backbone of a comprehensive support system for individuals and communities. In the context of health, social services act as a hub, addressing social determinants that profoundly impact health outcomes. Access to housing, employment, and mental health support, facilitated by social services, can significantly enhance an individual's overall health and reduce disparities¹. The programs offered in various settings, such as schools, can be influenced by social services provided to an individual, particularly a child, impacting the effectiveness of these programs in shaping children's lives. Similarly, academia's involvement in the social service workforce is vital for building a well-prepared and continually evolving workforce. Academic contributions extend beyond individual skill development to shaping the profession, informing policy, and advancing the broader goals of social justice and community well-being. Recognizing and strengthening this linkage is imperative for building a society where social, health and education are not isolated pillars but interconnected elements that uplift and empower every member of society.

This article aims to explore the challenges and emerging trends in the social sector, specifically within the social service workforce, plans for overcoming such challenges, and the future outlook for the social service workforce.

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Challenges and emerging trends

As the world evolves, so do the challenges and opportunities in the realm of social service work. The social service workforce faces a range of challenges that demand our attention and innovative solutions. Moreover, emerging trends are reshaping the landscape of social service delivery, pointing the way towards a more efficient, inclusive, and technology-driven future.

To frame this topic, it is important to note the two main challenges faced by the social service workforce ecosystem. The main challenges include:

1. Capacity and wellbeing of the workforce
2. Availability and resilience of the workforce

The first significant challenge lies in the undersupply of the workforce and their wellbeing, and it is a continuous issue that is faced across the globe. In many regions, there is a persistent struggle to attract and keep qualified professionals in social services, often due to factors such as inadequate compensation, high caseloads per professional, and challenging working conditions. For instance, in the UK alone, 335 million pounds are spent annually on social work contractors to serve families, as

recruiting and retaining permanent social workers has become a challenge². There needs to be a greater focus on retaining experienced social workers to help address the current supply challenges, and to retain knowledge, skills, and expertise within the profession. Variations in terms of working conditions along with perceived workload have exacerbated recruitment challenges across sectors, social and health. In the UK, it is reported that high caseloads, increasing complexity and staff shortages have impacted on staff morale³. Difficulties in recruitment and retention are becoming more prevalent compounded by a growing pay differential with the health sector which may impact on future recruitment efforts. Conversely, a decline in worker recruitment and retention can result in diminished job morale and ultimately, negative consequences for those in need of assistance. Globally, societies are struggling with these challenges. For example, in Japan, a shortage of social workers significantly impacts the level of support and services available to the world's largest aging population, leaving many without the care they require. Similarly, in Canada, the growing focus on addressing mental health needs has created an increased demand

for social workers, leaving some individuals struggling to access adequate services³. The dependence on worker retention and beneficiary outcomes is especially affecting child welfare programs, where the stakes are exceedingly high. While the pandemic was a pivotal event that significantly increased the demand for more skillful and capable social service professionals, it is crucial to recognize that this trend was already on the rise. Professionals were faced with rising caseloads, the adaptation to remote work, and the heightened needs of vulnerable groups. This strain not only revealed existing challenges but also emphasized the crucial necessity for robust support systems to protect the mental and emotional health of those in the social service workforce. Moreover, there has been a focus on strengthening the social service workforce in Lebanon, and this stemmed from the heavy workload and lack of services at the local level, as seen in Figure 1, the limited employment of social workers by the government compared to NGOs, the private sector, and international organizations creates a problem of instability and inter-sectoral mobility resulting in high turnover and losing social workers to other sectors⁴.

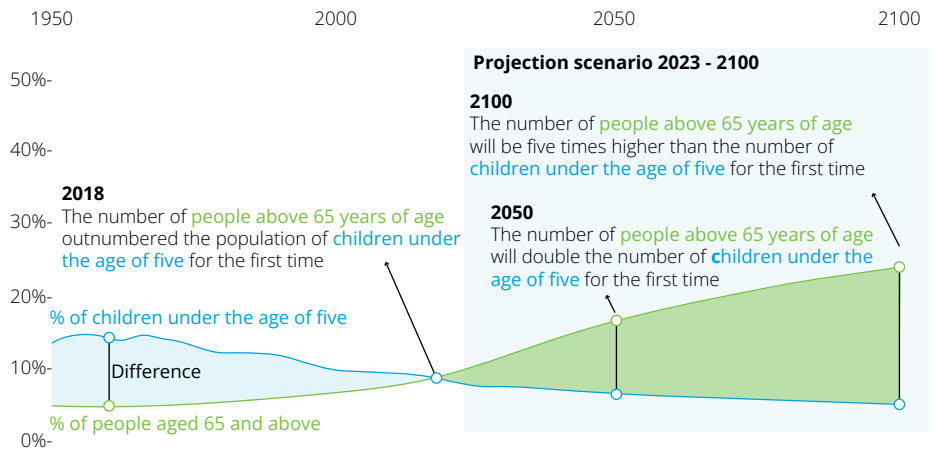


Source: Lebanon SSW survey data

Figure 1: Challenges faced by the social service workforce in Lebanon

The second challenge pertains to the growing demand for social services, outstripping the available resources and workforce capacity. As societal needs evolve, the demand for services in areas such as mental health, child welfare, and elderly care has surged. However, insufficient funding and resources have hindered the ability of social service providers to expand their workforce to meet this escalating demand. This imbalance can result in prolonged waiting times for beneficiaries and a strain on existing staff, jeopardizing the effectiveness and quality of interventions. Prior to the pandemic, the job outlook for social workers was already promising. Between 2019 and 2029, the job outlook for social workers is expected to grow by 13%, a growth rate that's much faster than average compared to all occupations⁵. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and even in a post-pandemic era, social workers in schools, welfare agencies, mental health clinics, hospitals, and beyond are even more in demand and are providing vital support to communities. According to the World Health Organization's Global Health and Ageing Study, "the number of individuals aged 65 or older is anticipated to climb from an average of 524 million in 2010 to an estimated 1.5 billion in 2050, with the majority of the growth occurring in developing nations."⁶ Furthermore, by 2050, the number of people aged 65 and older is predicted to outweigh children under the age of five (Figure 2)⁶. Likewise, Figure 3⁷ shows the expected aging population in the Middle East by 2050, namely the UAE and Saudi Arabia expected to reach 28% and 15.1%, respectively. Population ageing has prompted concern about the possibility of rising medical expenditures and long-term social care jobs and services for the elderly, as well as an imbalance between those of working age and the elderly due to shifting dependence ratios⁸. As the senior dependence ratio rises, it is expected that individuals will become increasingly reliant on social care services. The drastic impact of COVID-19, although temporary, underscored the critical need for adaptability. However, even without the pandemic, service delivery has been undergoing a constant evolution.

Global population share of children under the age of five versus the global population of people over the age of 65



Source: United Nations World Population Prospects (2022) (via OurWorldData.org)

Figure 2: The world's population is aging

An exemplary instance is the UAE, currently at a nascent stage in the social care sector, the government support tends to prioritize locals over expatriates, currently standing at 88.52% for expats. Given the sector's early development, there is an inherent need to address the majority expatriate populations with a well-equipped work-

force for social care needs in tandem with the predominant focus on nationals.

Addressing these challenges is imperative to strengthen the social service workforce, ensuring they are equipped to navigate the complexities of their roles and provide effective, compassionate support to those in need.

Countries	Percentage of population 65+			Percentage of population 80+		
	2010	2030	2050	2010	2030	2050
World	7.7	15.6	15.6	1.6	2.3	4.1
Algeria	4.6	19.1	19.1	0.7	1.2	3.7
Bahrain	2.1	25.4	25.4	0.3	0.6	4.3
Comoros	2.7	5.9	5.9	0.4	0.3	0.7
Djibouti	3.3	8.0	8.0	0.3	0.6	1.0
Egypt	5.0	14.2	14.2	0.7	1.4	2.8
Iraq	3.3	6.8	6.8	0.4	0.5	1.0
Jordan	3.9	12.8	12.8	0.5	0.9	2.2
Kuwait	2.5	16.1	16.1	0.3	0.5	2.2
Lebanon	7.3	21.0	21.0	1.1	1.8	4.6
Libya	4.3	17.4	17.4	0.6	1.4	3.3
Mauritania	2.7	6.6	6.6	0.2	0.3	0.7
Morocco	5.5	17.7	17.7	0.8	1.4	3.7
Oman	2.5	22.5	22.5	0.5	0.8	3.6
Palestine	2.7	7.1	7.1	0.3	0.6	1.2
Qatar	1.0	21.2	21.2	0.1	0.3	3.5
Saudi Arabia	3.0	15.1	15.1	0.6	0.9	2.2
Somalia	2.7	3.8	3.8	0.3	0.3	0.5
Syria	3.9	12.8	12.8	0.6	1.1	2.9
Sudan	3.6	7.5	7.5	0.4	0.6	1.1
Tunisia	7.0	21.4	21.4	1.2	1.8	4.6
UAE	0.4	28.0	28.0	0.1	0.2	4.2
Yemen	2.6	5.6	5.6	0.3	0.4	0.7

Source: United Nations Department of social and economic affairs, (2017).

Figure 3: Current and projected percentages in the MENA of old and oldest-old populations

Tackling social service workforce challenges

To create a continuous cycle aimed at overcoming the challenges faced by the social service workforce, a strategic approach involving three key stages could be adopted. Firstly, fostering awareness and promoting the pursuit of studies in this field is vital. This encourages individuals to engage and invest in their education, recognizing the significance of social service work. Secondly, once individuals enter this arena, it is crucial to guide their career paths, ensuring clear planning for their development and progression within the sector. Recognizing

the essential link between capability and the challenges faced, this stage is designed to provide comprehensive support, addressing both professional development and the intricate aspects of mental and emotional well-being. Lastly, implementing initiatives that focus on retention becomes imperative to ensure these professionals are motivated and inclined to stay. This strives to enhance the supply of skilled professionals while concurrently nurturing their resilience and well-being, forming a robust solution to the identified challenges faced by the social service workforce.

Collaborative efforts have been provided by the government of Singapore to develop a skills framework for the social service workforce. This has been jointly developed by government entities, service providers, and education and training organizations to promote skills mastery and lifelong learning. Singapore's skills framework highlights social service career tracks for new entrants in the sector.

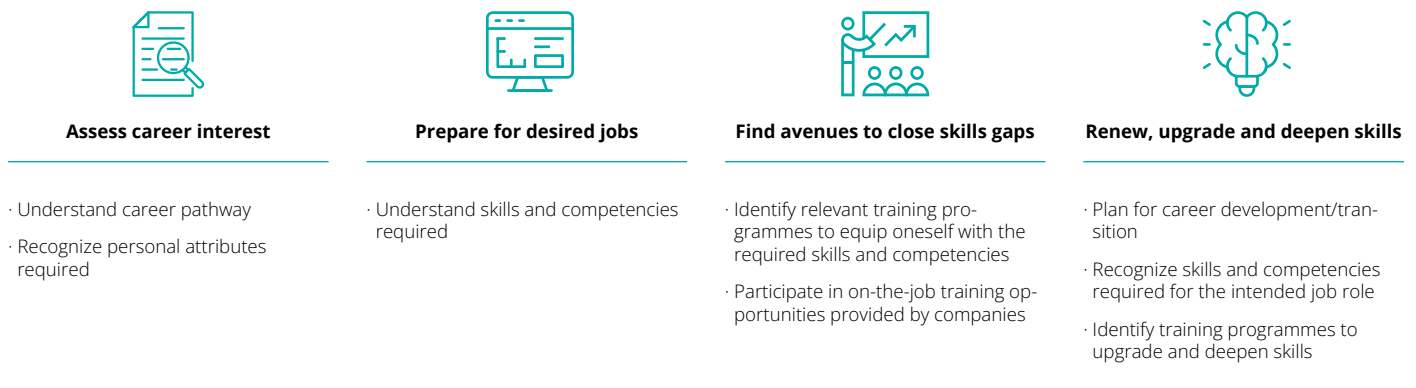


Figure 5: Components of the skills framework:

In parallel, the government of Singapore has launched a Wellness Resource Hub to combat challenges that social service professionals face due to high workloads. It provides tools and programs which professionals can utilize to manage their mental, physical and social well-being. These tools and programs include: (1) Employee Assistance Programs, which facilitate care for professionals through counselling providers (2) Wellness retreat to help develop mental resilience (3) Sabbatical leave scheme which allows professionals to recharge through 10 weeks' worth of paid leave with salary support of up to \$15,000¹⁰.

In the dynamic landscape of the social service workforce, Jordan was involved in one of the pioneering initiatives to establish an Association for professional development for social workers in 2016. They go beyond traditional roles by offering highly specialized, tuition-free training to its members, acting as a crucial link between them and potential employers, both locally and internationally. The Association joined the International Federation for Social Workers, a well-known global federation. This international collaboration underscores Jordan's commitment to global standards and practices within the field.

Moreover, retention strategies can be implemented between ecosystem players - education institutes, providers, government, private and third sector. A study in the UK on retention strategies of social care workers identified certain elements that were implemented to combat the high workforce turnover rate. Examples including practice learning, fast-track graduate programs, and apprenticeships may support the retention of social workers, while pre-employment training, national recruitment campaigns, care work ambassadors, and values-based recruitment could help the attraction, recruitment, and retention of the wider social service workforce.

Notably, practice learning initiatives reported that it is becoming increasingly embedded within local authorities and has an important part to play in the future recruitment of social workers¹¹. The study found that employers indicate a values-based approach to recruitment has resulted in lower recruitment costs, positive return on investment, lower staff turnover, better staff performance, and improved retention of staff¹². An exemplary instance lies with the Early Childhood Authority in Abu Dhabi, which inaugurated an academy dedicated to childhood development. The institution offers a holistic scholarship program designed to empower students with a diverse skill set, enabling them to pursue an array of promising career pathways. Graduates can explore roles as childhood care practitioners, nursery aides, live-in or live-out caregivers, home teachers, professional assistants, and even venture into entrepreneurship within the field of childhood

care and development¹³. These strategies included collaboration among various ecosystem players, including educational institutes, service providers, government entities, private organizations, and the third sector.

Governments can strengthen their workforce through the aforementioned approaches, as this will ensure a sustained support for vulnerable populations and fostering a resilient and responsive social service ecosystem. The effectiveness of these approaches is contingent upon acknowledging and respecting the cultural context in which they are applied. It is important to note that there is no one size fits all approach, however, emphasizing a holistic approach becomes imperative, recognizing the cultural context and societal nuances that shape the delivery of social services. This is defined as establishing clear frameworks on how the ecosystem should function to support the profes-

sionals and their career development. This involves streamlining communication channels between educational institutions, service providers, and government agencies to ensure a cohesive and supportive environment. In a parallel initiative, the Community Development Authority in Dubai, UAE, established a groundbreaking collaboration with the British University in Dubai. Through this partnership, the focus is on elevating the skill set and proficiency of the social service workforce. This is achieved through tailored, intensive training programs, resulting in a substantial surge in the number of licensed social service professionals¹⁴. This strategic approach underscores the emphasis on amplifying the expertise and capabilities of the current workforce, precisely catering to the diverse and evolving needs of beneficiaries.

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Future of the social service workforce

As demand for social service workers is projected to grow in the future, the social service workforce needs to be adequately supported to meet the needs of the population. Enhancements such as technological advancements, job flexibility, and other digital tools will be necessary to improve the social service ecosystem.

Governments take vested interest in providing safety and support for the well-being of their citizens. The protection of children and the aging, along with assistance provisions for citizens experiencing unemployment, disabilities, homelessness, substance abuse, and mental illness are well-supported missions in civilized societies. Social programs spend globally is on average 20%

(Figure 6) of government GDP budgets¹⁵. In 2019, however, governments were in crisis. Rapidly escalating numbers seeking government assistance, limited resources, inefficient service delivery systems, long-term government dependency, and worker burnout² as a result of the pandemic have forced governments to rethink how social program services are delivered.

Social spending | Public, % of GDP, 2022 or latest available

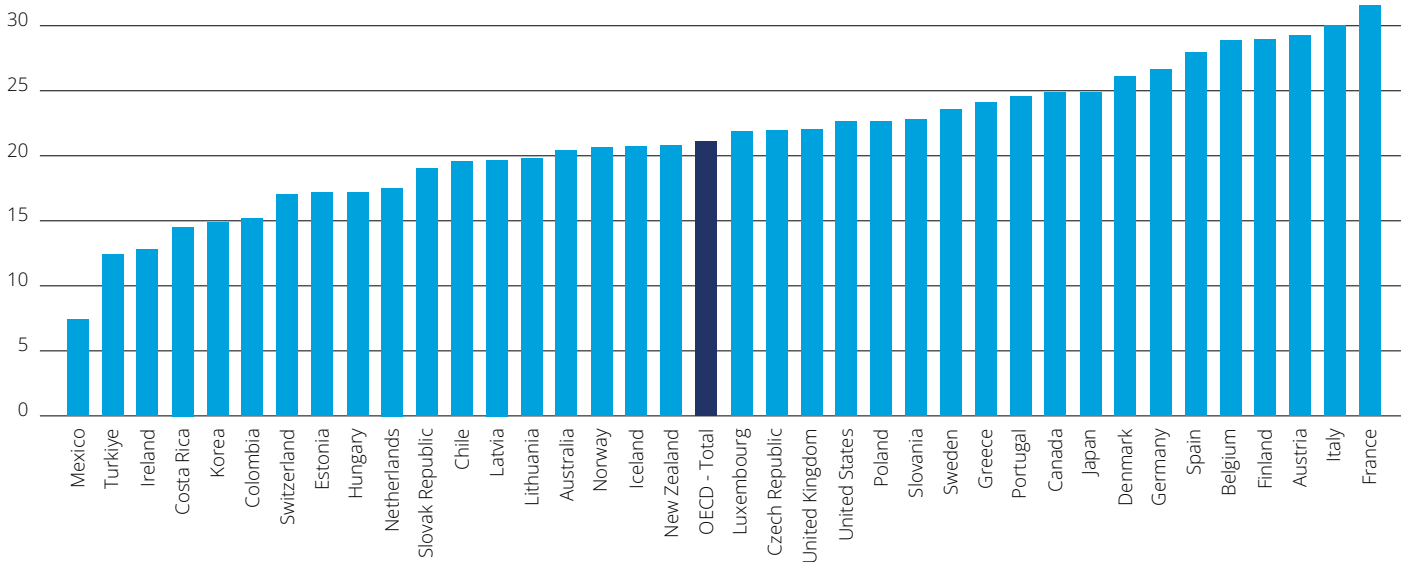


Figure 6: OECD countries social spending in 2022 (%)

One example of technological advancement that could revolutionize the social service workforce is the utilization of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Deloitte's AI model highlights the strengths of AI and other technologies, emphasizing their ability to handle large volumes of data, automate processes, and improve accuracy¹⁶. This transformative approach can significantly augment the capacity of social service workforces and enhance the experience of individuals and families interacting with human services programs.

Using a combination of traditional AI and generative AI, human services organizations can adhere to three principles to transform service delivery (see Figure 7 in Deloitte's model). For instance:

1. Streamlining application processes: Processing intake forms and case management is often a lengthy and

cumbersome process in social services. Figure 7 proposes the use of intelligent optical character recognition and robotic process automation to extract information from applications. A rules-engine software can handle the initial evaluation and case setup, allowing caseworkers to validate output and focus more on complex cases. Generative AI then plays a crucial role by providing detailed reasoning behind eligibility determinations, tailoring messages to eligible individuals, and simplifying policy questions for applicants.

2. Improving onboarding for caseworkers: High turnover has been a persistent challenge for human services agencies, leading to the loss of institutional knowledge. Thus, generative AI can automatically code exit interviews of retiring caseworkers, distilling valuable lessons for new hires. This technology can also

generate onboarding documents and provide critical on-the-job support based on policy manuals, program rules, and case data, thus simplifying access to assistance for new workers¹⁶.

3. Reducing administrative burden: Documenting and recording information constitute significant time-consuming tasks for caseworkers. Deloitte's model proposes that AI can assist by extracting key information from case notes or interviews and entering it into the system¹⁶. Generative AI can then generate first drafts of reports, speed up paperwork, and augment decision-making by analyzing historical cases, identifying patterns, and summarizing interventions.

This comprehensive approach enhances the overall efficiency and effectiveness of social service workforces, allowing professionals to focus more on impactful fieldwork and expert interventions.

Transforming human services tasks through AI

● AI improving effectiveness ● AI improving efficiency

Transforming tasks	● Recommending other eligible human services programs	● Generating assessment plans with recommended interventions	● Assess equity in services
	● Auto-filling applications forms	● Case copilot or assistant	● Assist with hearings and case prep
Enhancing existing tasks	● Automating data entry from paper	● Fraud detection	● Automating verification of data
	● Addressing queries of applicants	● Predicting and preventing delinquencies	● Client follow up and documentation
	● Automating application screening	● Prioritizing inspections	
	Intake	Case planning	Service delivery and case management
			Human services life cycle

Source: Deloitte analysis

Figure 7: Deloitte - Transforming human services tasks through AI¹⁶

In a world where societal needs are evolving, the resilience and adaptability of the social service workforce become predominant. By embracing emerging trends, implementing effective mitigation strategies, and leveraging technological advancements, societies can ensure that these dedicated professionals continue to serve as catalysts for positive change, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive future for all.

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Best practices for getting started

It is imperative for governments to develop long-term action plans that adhere to the constant evolving trends in societal needs. Our view is driven by a focus on the three key areas below related to the social service workforce:

1. Attracting and developing talent

- a. Implement policies and strategies tailored to the attraction and continuous growth of the social service workforce by crafting adaptable frameworks aligned with the specific needs of the nation. This ensures ongoing professional development.
- b. Introduce professional associations to serve as invaluable support systems, aiding professionals in comprehending the evolving requirements and competencies within their specialized areas in the realm of social services.

2. Developing retention strategies

- a. Enforce policies that prioritize the well-being of social service professionals, by providing in-house counseling services or employee assistance programs, recognizing the inevitability of burnout and stress due to the sensitive nature of their cases and heavy workloads.
- b. Forge partnerships with educational institutions, health sector, private sector, and third-sector organizations to emphasize the significance of a collaborative, multi-sectoral approach. Establish new training centers dedicated to honing specialized skills in social work, offering continuous career development and advancement opportunities to them.

3. Promoting digital practice for the workforce

- a. Pioneer a digital workforce model and become familiar with underlying technology, drawing inspiration from successful implementations such as Deloitte's AI Model mentioned in this article. This approach streamlines administrative tasks, enabling the social service workforce to concentrate on directly impactful activities in delivering social care to beneficiaries.
- b. Allocate resources and investments towards technological advancements aimed at alleviating the strain on the social service workforce. By enhancing the technological experience for social workers, we reinforce job satisfaction, thus fortifying worker retention and ensuring consistent and high-quality service provision to beneficiaries.

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Resources

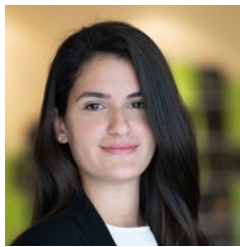
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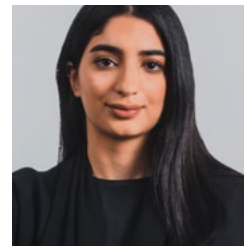
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