



Illustration by Chris Campbell

# Where is our firetruck?

## *Elevating the Value of Human Services and Strengthening Workforce Development*

**S**moke rises from a burning building—the blare of sirens approaches. Firetrucks arrive on the scene. Firefighters jump out to combat the flames to save precious lives. The community applauds them, and rightly so. They respond bravely to crises every day. Their work is visible, and their contribution is obvious to all.

Every day, first responders of another kind work on the front lines to provide essential support to communities across the country. They, too, are brave, but their contribution is far less visible. They include school counselors supporting youth, parole officers rehabilitating inmates for a return to society, social workers ensuring homes for children without families, home-care workers keeping our aging loved ones independent in their homes, and psychologists treating people who have mental illness or are suffering from

substance abuse. These responders comprise a community's human services workforce, ensuring the health and well-being of individuals, children, and families in our communities across the country.

"Human services workers are as essential to a strong community as emergency responders, but their contribution is under recognized," says Dr. Bill Hazel, senior deputy executive director of the Claude Moore Charitable Foundation and former Virginia Secretary of Health and Human Resources.

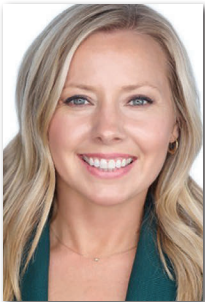
Demand for human services workers continues to grow. Yet, this vital workforce that responds to others' crises is itself in crisis. The average national caregiver turnover rate is 65 percent, and the staffing shortages of government human services workers are reaching emergency levels in many communities.<sup>1</sup>

*Why has this essential workforce reached such a critical juncture?*

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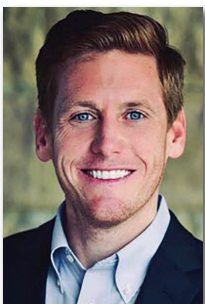
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Although many enter with a strong sense of mission, it becomes difficult for them to withstand the obstacles that come their way. Salaries tend not to keep up with the rising cost of living. The pressure of working with populations under stress has grown in recent years, along with an uptick in violence against human services workers.<sup>2</sup> As their colleagues leave, remaining workers are often tasked with taking on even heavier loads. Meanwhile, competing job opportunities at private organizations or in other sectors tend to offer higher pay, better work conditions, or both.

The Claude Moore Charitable Foundation studied the challenges affecting the human services workforce and identified solutions to elevate their improvement and development in the Commonwealth of Virginia.<sup>3</sup> Their findings provide a road map for other communities nationwide to build a stronger, more sustainable human services workforce to meet growing needs.

### The Path to Addressing the Crisis: Four Key Areas for Action

Given the challenges facing the sector, combating the crisis in the human services workforce requires action on four fronts: resources, recruitment, retention, and regulation. Working in concert, they bolster the human services workforce, which can improve the quality of and access to care for the community. For example, today, inadequate resources and regulatory requirements hamper the recruitment and retention of talent. Conversely, adequate resource allocations across sectors, regions, and jobs, working hand in hand with improvements in regulatory practices, can spur a reversal in this dynamic.

To start a virtuous cycle, communities can take the following steps to strengthen resources, recruitment, retention, and regulation in the human services sector.

#### Resources

- Invest in comprehensive studies to assess where funding can be blended, braided, or adjusted to serve communities and providers

better. State and federal guidelines set the reimbursement and shared funding models that contribute to the disparity in regional services availability.

- Consider creative regional funding models that include philanthropic and other community employers and organizations to increase funding. Examine ways to blend and braid funding when emergency medical technicians or police officers lean in for social services work, particularly in rural areas where resources are limited.
- Reassess a more appropriate compensation structure to address pay inequities and determine levels for workers according to market value with cost-of-living adjustments, especially in less-resourced jurisdictions where the current funding formula with low match rates causes a struggle to provide adequate pay and resources.
- Invest in resources needed to carry out care responsibilities, including sufficient mobile technology for workers with client-facing responsibility in home and community settings, modern technology systems in institutions, and data analysis capabilities by providers and government agencies.

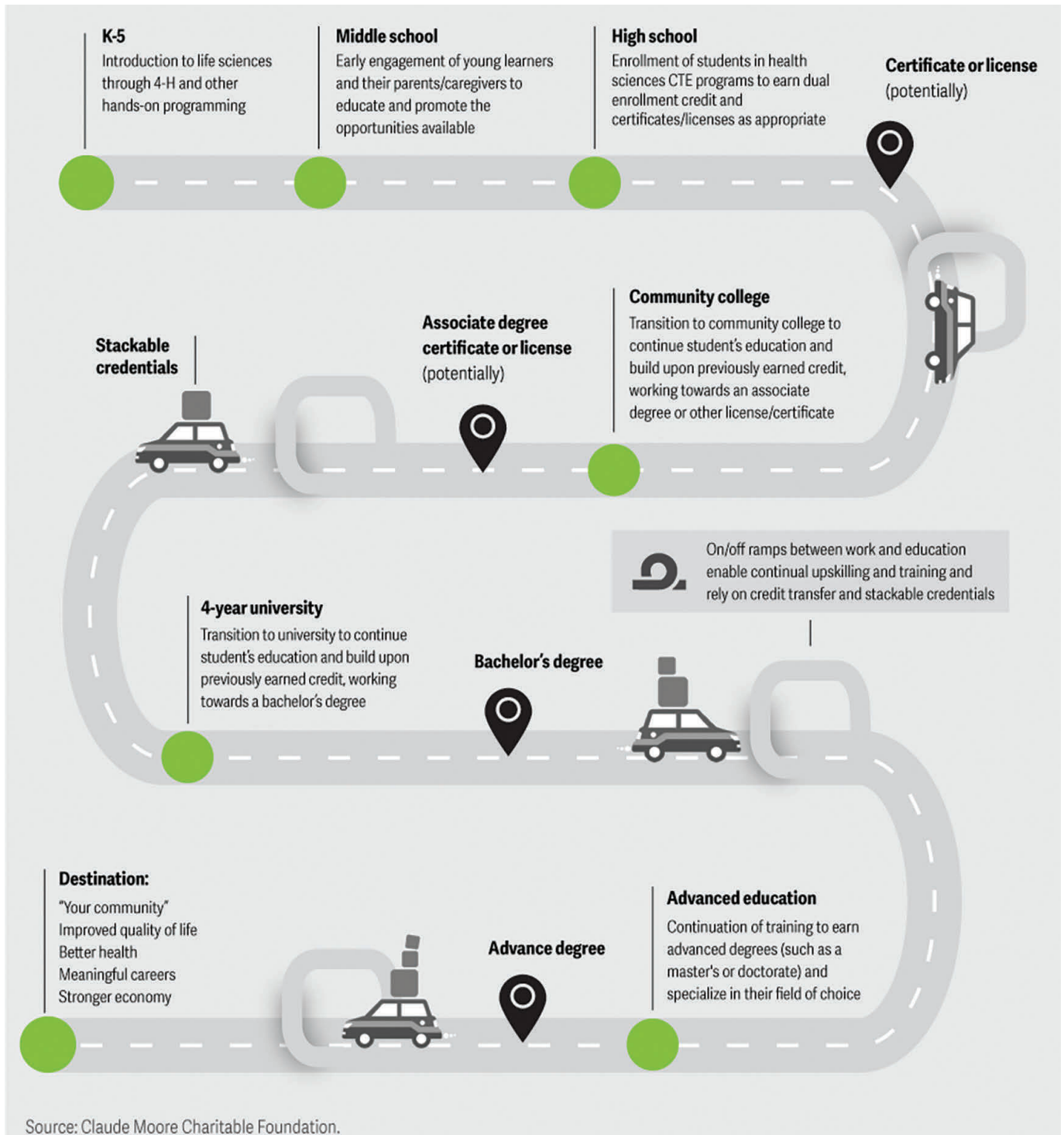
#### Recruit

- Increase the pool of available workers by reaching out to diverse candidates and by educating the public about the importance of human services work. A public education campaign similar to the Army Strong campaign can help to promote understanding and respect for the sector.<sup>4</sup>
- Increase outreach by human services agencies to elementary and middle school students to help inspire candidates earlier when they are starting to form ideas about future careers. Include guidance about certification programs students can attain after secondary school, community college, or other education levels (see Figure 1).

#### Retain

- Provide adequate compensation, prioritize job quality and

**Figure 1: Health science highway**



experience, and establish clear career pathways. Offer professional licensing programs and creative regional funding models to help improve pay and benefits for human services professionals.

- Create onboarding and leadership development programs to improve the job experience. Allow for innovative pathways and early career

mapping to elevate career progression in clearly established routes.

**Regulation**

- Reduce regulatory burdens by having state leadership, regulatory bodies, and service delivery agencies identify the regulations that hinder entry into this profession. Engage state and local agencies

and providers that manage federal regulatory standards and reporting, in addition to state requirements, to help make decisions with state boards, regulators, and legislators regarding licensing standards for the health services profession.

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■ Encourage the review of existing rules and consider innovative solutions to ensure that regulations do not arbitrarily exclude or limit qualified workers, such as instituting licensing reciprocity agreements with neighboring states to ensure adequate staffing.

### A Call for Community Support and Recognition

The human services workforce in state and local governments may not have a red firetruck as a visible reminder of their importance, but their role in strengthening the social fabric cannot be understated. The growing crisis among these essential workers is a siren call to the communities that depend on them. At this critical juncture, communities across the country have an opportunity to initiate long-needed reforms to put the human services workforce on a more solid footing so that it, in turn, can continue to serve those in the greatest need in the years to come. 📌

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#### Reference Notes

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