



## In Our Do'ers Profile, we highlight some of the hardworking and talented individuals in public human services. This issue features Robert Fersh, President and Founder of the Convergence Center for Policy Resolution.

**Name:** Robert J. Fersh

**Title:** President and Founder, Convergence Center for Policy Resolution

**Years of Service:** I've worked on human services issues at the national level for 40 years. My first job out of law school, and a favorite one, was actually with APHSA (then the American Public Welfare Association). I staffed committees and task forces of state and local administrators in areas like Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TANF's predecessor), food stamps, and welfare reform generally. This experience grounded me with appreciation for those who actually run public human services programs.

My career path for many years related mainly to poverty and hunger in the United States. I served on the staffs of three congressional committees, held a political appointment at the Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and later led a national anti-hunger organization (Food Research and Action Center) for a dozen years.

I started Convergence in 2009 to build a new approach to challenges of national consequence. We call our approach "dialogue-leading-to-action." We convene diverse and often conflicting groups, help them build relationships of trust over time, and then help them find common ground and form unlikely alliances for action. APHSA is at the table for two of our current projects on Economic Mobility and on the Federal Budget Process. We

have had success on other issues such as K-12 education, long-term supports and services for elderly and disabled Americans, and nutrition and wellness.

**Rewards of the Job:** I find it immensely satisfying to get people who never thought they could talk to each other to collaborate to make a difference in people's lives. The ultimate pay-off for me is that these transformed relationships often lead to groundbreaking solutions on important national issues. I hope this will prove true in our current project on Economic Mobility, which has a mission central to the concerns of the public human services community. Our diverse stakeholder group—business, labor, advocacy, workforce experts, human services leaders, and more—seeks ways to improve economic opportunity, especially for low-income Americans, by creating new approaches to workforce development, quality job creation, and increased financial security.

### **Accomplishments Most Proud Of:**

Early in my career, I was proud to work closely with state food stamp directors to eliminate the rule that required most participants to pay for their food stamp allotments. Eliminating the purchase requirement made the program more accessible for millions of Americans in need. In my work on Capitol Hill, I had multiple opportunities to help forge bipartisan legislation, primarily on nutrition programs like WIC, School Breakfast and SNAP/Food Stamps. Then as an outside advocate, I helped form broad coalitions to protect and expand feeding programs for the underprivileged. And now, I am gratified

to lead an organization that helps people find genuine common ground, without sweeping differences under the rug, on issue after major issue. I would cite our work on K-12 education, where a remarkable group of strange bedfellows—from charter school networks to teachers' unions—is working under our auspices to accelerate the reach of "learner-centered" education, as the most far reaching of all our accomplishments.

### **Future Challenges for the Delivery of Public Human Services:**

As an outside observer, I see the need for a new level of dialogue on balancing state and local flexibility with meeting the underlying purposes of various federal human services programs. This flexibility could potentially lead to administrative efficiency and better tailored supports and services for low-income individuals and families. However, for many advocates of flexibility, block grants are the preferred means of implementation. For others, block grants epitomize the potential to unravel the safety net. Both sides have legitimate points and I would hope we can find a way to satisfy the valid underlying interests of those engaged in this debate whose primary concern is improving the lives of those living at the edges of society.

**Outside Interests:** I have been active in community building and service through my synagogue and have enjoyed and participated in athletics all my life. At this point, I have been relegated mainly to golf as a competitive sport, a great test of self-acceptance and equanimity. I play that high score wins. 🏌️