

Running Head: PUBLIC-NONPROFIT PARTNERSHIPS

The Evolving Relationship between Public and Nonprofit Sector Human Service  
Organizations: From Contractual to Partnership

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\* We acknowledge the significant contributions of Mack Fellows, Catherine Vu, MSW and Sara Kimberlin, MSW who assisted with the development of this paper

## Abstract

The delivery of human services in contemporary American society involves complex relationships between public and nonprofit organizations. These relationships, often referred to as public-nonprofit partnerships, have market-like characteristics where government agencies purchase services from private vendors to meet the welfare needs of the community. These purchase-of-service contracts have become one of the primary methods for financing and delivering local social services, as seen by the unparalleled growth of government reliance on nonprofits organizations to delivery government-funded human services in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Today, this public-nonprofit partnership reflects a web of mutual interdependence that offers both opportunities and challenges, especially with private philanthropic sources supporting nonprofits and representing a new element in this partnership. This paper examines contemporary partnerships from both the public and nonprofit sector perspectives, describes the influence of public policy, identifies the emerging role of philanthropy, and concludes with an agenda for future research.

**KEY WORDS:** Public-nonprofit partnerships, purchase-of-service contracts