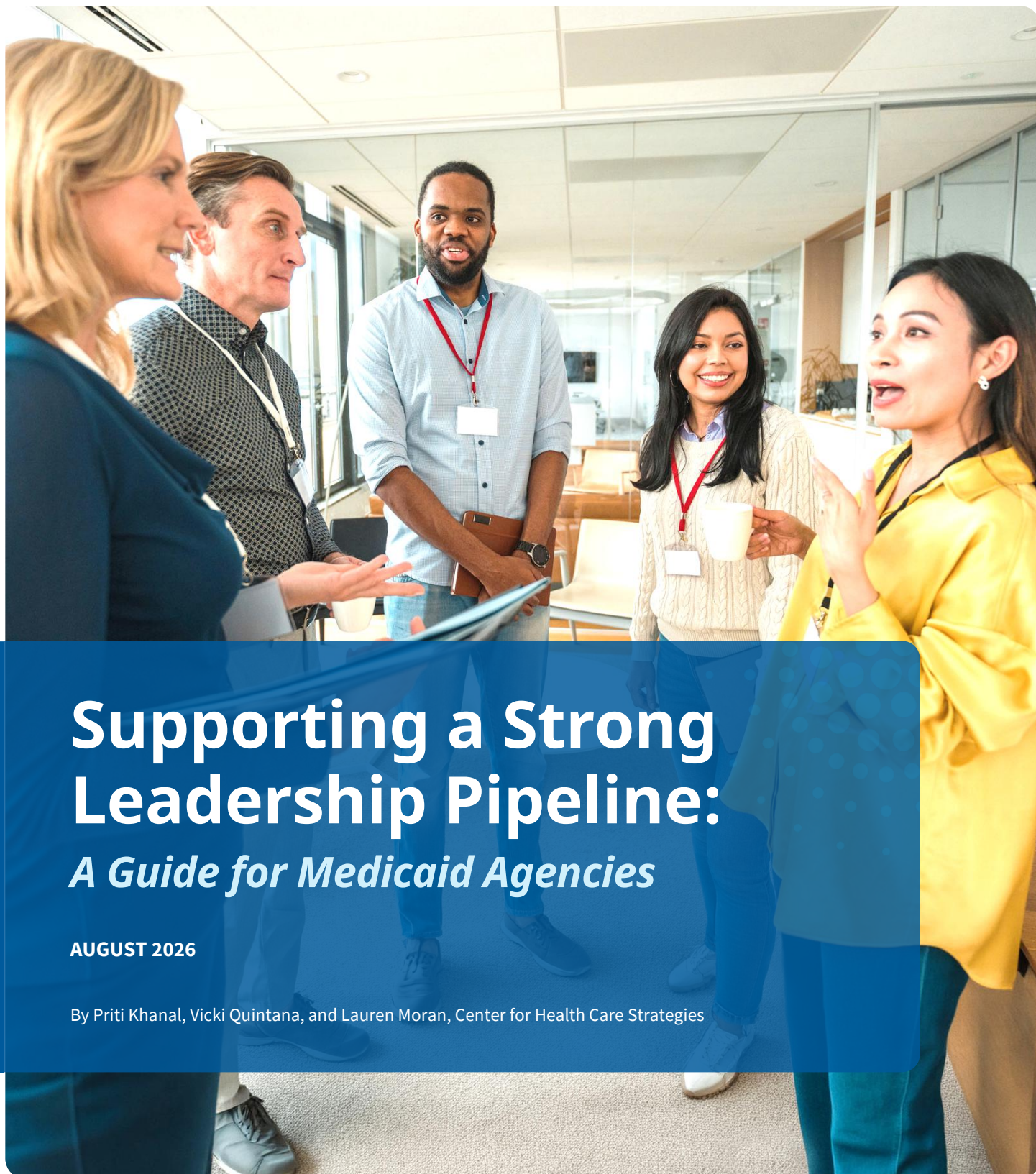




Supporting a Strong Leadership Pipeline:

A Guide for Medicaid Agencies

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ABOUT THE CENTER FOR HEALTH CARE STRATEGIES

The Center for Health Care Strategies (CHCS) is a policy design and implementation partner devoted to improving outcomes for people enrolled in Medicaid. CHCS supports partners across sectors and disciplines to make more effective, efficient, and equitable care possible for millions of people across the nation.

The **National Medicaid Leadership Center**, led by CHCS, provides leadership and capacity-building training to help Medicaid and health and human services agency leaders navigate a rapidly evolving health care landscape. The *Leadership Center* equips state and territory officials to drive meaningful change, strengthen programs, and improve care for the communities they serve. Learn more at www.chcs.org.

Introduction

State and territory Medicaid agency leaders are responsible for ensuring high-quality health care services for their members, making effective use of resources, and supporting the development of a workforce that can meet current and future needs. Amid a shifting health care policy and program landscape, evolving stakeholder expectations, and ongoing resource constraints, Medicaid leaders can benefit from strengthening [organizational resilience](#) — the ability to anticipate, respond to, and adapt to change, whether gradual or sudden. By embedding resilience into agency culture, Medicaid leaders can build the agility and insight needed to sustain performance in an evolving health care environment.

Leaders who can navigate uncertainty, foster innovation, and guide teams through change are essential to sustaining effective agencies. Proactively identifying and developing future leaders is therefore critical. Because most Medicaid leaders [rise from within their agencies](#), building a strong internal leadership pipeline can help meet current and future needs while reinforcing organizational resilience.

Resilience also depends on leaders who understand and prioritize the members and communities they serve. Valuing the lived experience of the workforce can help identify gaps in services, anticipate community priorities, and inform more responsive policies. By cultivating leadership pipelines that draw on professional expertise and lived experience, Medicaid agencies can strengthen their capacity to adapt and innovate over time.

This guide, developed by the Center for Health Care Strategies (CHCS) with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, provides practical strategies to help Medicaid agencies strengthen their leadership pipeline. It identifies four key steps agencies can take to build a strong leadership pipeline, including: (1) setting a vision for a leadership pipeline; (2) investing in leadership development strategies; (3) creating a clear organizational development action plan; and (4) establishing an evaluation plan to monitor efforts. The guide draws on CHCS research examining leadership development and workforce advancement in Medicaid agencies and a survey of Medicaid leaders nationally.

Key Terms

- **Leadership Pipeline:** A structured process to support staff development and prepare them for leadership positions.
- **Medicaid Leader:** While leadership can occur at any level regardless of title, this resource defines Medicaid leader as a person in a senior management, deputy-level/executive, or director-level role in Medicaid.
- **Lived Experience:** Knowledge gained through first-hand personal experience, such as being enrolled in Medicaid or another publicly financed program.

Steps to Building a Strong Leadership Pipeline

This section outlines four steps to build a strong leadership pipeline, and describes actions agencies can take to help ensure successful implementation.

1. Set a Vision for a Strong Leadership Pipeline

A clear vision for developing a leadership pipeline defines direction, aligns priorities, and guides the investment of time and resources. By establishing and communicating this vision, leaders can build shared understanding and momentum across the agency to support leadership development.

Checklist for setting a vision for a strong leadership pipeline:

- ☐ **Clearly state goals.** Collaborate with staff to set specific, measurable goals that guide action.
Example: Our goal is to develop a leadership team that is adaptable, skilled in navigating complexity, and grounded in the diverse experiences of our workforce and the communities we serve.
- ☐ **Connect goals to mission, values, and outcomes.** Linking leadership goals to the agency's mission, values, and desired outcomes can help staff see how their work contributes to broader success.
Example: Developing leaders with a range of professional and lived experiences will strengthen program design, improve services for members, and advance our mission.
- ☐ **Engage staff across levels.** Gathering input from staff at every level can help refine the vision and increase buy-in. Be clear about the purposes of engagement — whether seeking input, feedback, or endorsement.
Example: Host a strategic planning session with staff from multiple levels to define what a strong leadership pipeline looks like and how it supports agency goals.

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Additional CHCS Resources

These resources offer further insights to support Medicaid agencies in building a strong leadership pipeline:

- [Identifying Opportunities to Support a Diverse Pipeline of Rising Medicaid Leaders](#) — Analyzes results of a nationwide survey of Medicaid agency staff to uncover opportunities to support future Medicaid leaders.
- [Exploring the Pathways to Medicaid Leadership](#) — Examines results from a survey of Medicaid agency staff to understand the current pathways to agency leadership positions and uncover opportunities to strengthen the pipeline.

- ❑ **Identify the supports needed to achieve the vision.** These may include leadership training, mentorship, dedicated time for strategic work, and access to tools and resources. Share how these activities connect to day-to-day work and long-term goals.

Example: We will offer regular development opportunities focused on leadership competencies — such as strategic planning, communicating, and team building — and create space for staff to reflect on how their personal and professional experiences shape their leadership approach.

- ❑ **Communicate the vision with transparency.** Key considerations for communicating the vision include:

- **Content:** What do staff need to know? Is the rationale for the vision clear? How does current work connect to the vision?
- **Timing:** What actions or milestones can staff expect in the near- and long-term?
- **Frequency:** How often and through what channels (e.g., staff meetings, newsletters, intranet updates) will the vision be shared and reinforced?
- **Messengers:** Use varied messengers, including leadership and emerging leaders, to ensure the vision resonates across the agency.

2. Invest in Leadership Development Strategies

Building a strong leadership pipeline requires investment in staff at every level of an organization. Whether a team member is new to Medicaid, advancing mid-career, or preparing for executive leadership, tailored support can help them achieve their professional goals and contribute to the organization’s mission. Agencies can consider a range of strategies that meet staff where they are in their careers and reinforce the organization’s long-term vision for leadership development.

Key strategies include:

- **Onboarding and mentorship:** Structured onboarding and peer mentorship help new staff — whether just entering the workforce or entering a senior-level position — better navigate agency dynamics and build foundational skills.
- **Leadership training and projects:** Mid-level staff can benefit from formal training or project-based leadership opportunities that enable them to assume more responsibility and broaden their exposure to different operational and policy areas.
- **Leadership coaching:** Coaching and succession planning can prepare staff for senior leadership roles by offering personalized support to strengthen leadership competencies and guide career transitions.

Enhance Development Strategies

CHCS' analysis found that many agencies already have professional development strategies that provide a foundation for establishing a clear leadership pipeline.

Checklist for investing in leadership development strategies:

- ❑ **Prioritize development conversations.** Ensure regular, focused conversations between supervisors and direct reports to identify professional goals, desired skills, and milestones for growth. These conversations should be separate from task or project discussions.
Example: Hold two to three meetings per year dedicated to staff development planning.
- ❑ **Encourage shadowing opportunities.** Invite early- and mid-career staff to observe policy or program discussions outside of their daily responsibilities to broaden exposure and understanding.
Example: Invite enrollment team associates to join policy meetings to learn about how decisions are made.
- ❑ **Create cross-program opportunities.** Enable staff to work across teams or departments to support networking and expand perspectives, particularly in hybrid or virtual work environments. Clearly define roles and explain how these opportunities support professional growth.
Example: Identify opportunities for staff participation in cross-department workgroups.
- ❑ **Foster peer learning and networking.** Dedicate time for staff to connect and build relationships, share experiences, and discuss career development in informal settings.
Example: Schedule quarterly peer development discussions or networking sessions.
- ❑ **Bridge connections between early- and mid-career staff and senior leadership.** Provide opportunities for staff to engage directly with agency leadership.
Example: Hold “Lunch and Learns” or “Fireside Chats” with rotating senior leaders to share insights from their leadership journeys.
- ❑ **Establish mentorship programs.** Pair staff with mentors who can provide tailored career guidance and help navigate agency culture.
Example: Match mid-career staff with senior mentors based on career development goals.

Tailor Approaches to Agency Context

Leadership development is not one-size-fits-all. Medicaid agencies can tailor strategies to their unique contexts — including workforce size, composition, and organizational structure — to ensure supports are relevant and sustainable.

Checklist for investing in leadership development through tailored approaches:

- ☐ **Support staff-led efforts.** Engage staff in shaping leadership development opportunities, such as trainings, mentorship programs, and peer networks, to ensure initiatives are more likely to be meaningful, accessible, and impactful.
- ☐ **Value lived experience and member experience.** It is important for Medicaid leaders to recognize the value of both professional expertise and lived experience in their agencies. Medicaid staff and leaders with lived experience — whether as Medicaid members, caregivers, or frontline workers — offer unique insights that can inform more responsive, person-centered policies and programs. Agency leaders and staff can foster an organizational culture grounded in empathy, humility, and awareness of the realities and needs of members by encouraging reflection on how personal experiences shape decision making and incorporating community and member voice into policy and program design.
- ☐ **Avoid uniform approaches.** Offer multiple development opportunities to meet different needs. For example, coaching may be most effective for senior leaders, whereas mentorship or shadowing may be more valuable for emerging leaders. Additionally, CHCS' analysis found that individuals with disabilities expressed strong interest in mentorship experiences, whereas others may prefer opportunities to shadow colleagues.

3. Create a Clear Organizational Development Action Plan

Training and professional development are essential not only for staff success and retention, but also for strengthening overall organizational capacity within Medicaid agencies. A planful, agency-wide approach can help ensure all staff — particularly rising leaders — have consistent access to opportunities for learning, growth, and advancement, while reinforcing long-term organizational development goals.

[Common challenges](#) identified by CHCS’ research include:

- **Inconsistent access to training.** Many Medicaid agencies offer internal training, but opportunities for external skill-building, growth assignments, and cross-team connections are often limited to select staff.
- **Unclear pathways to promotion.** Staff often lack mentorship and structured career development opportunities, and promotion pathways may be unclear.
- **Limited annual development planning.** Fewer than half of agencies [report](#) having consistent annual development planning across all staff levels.

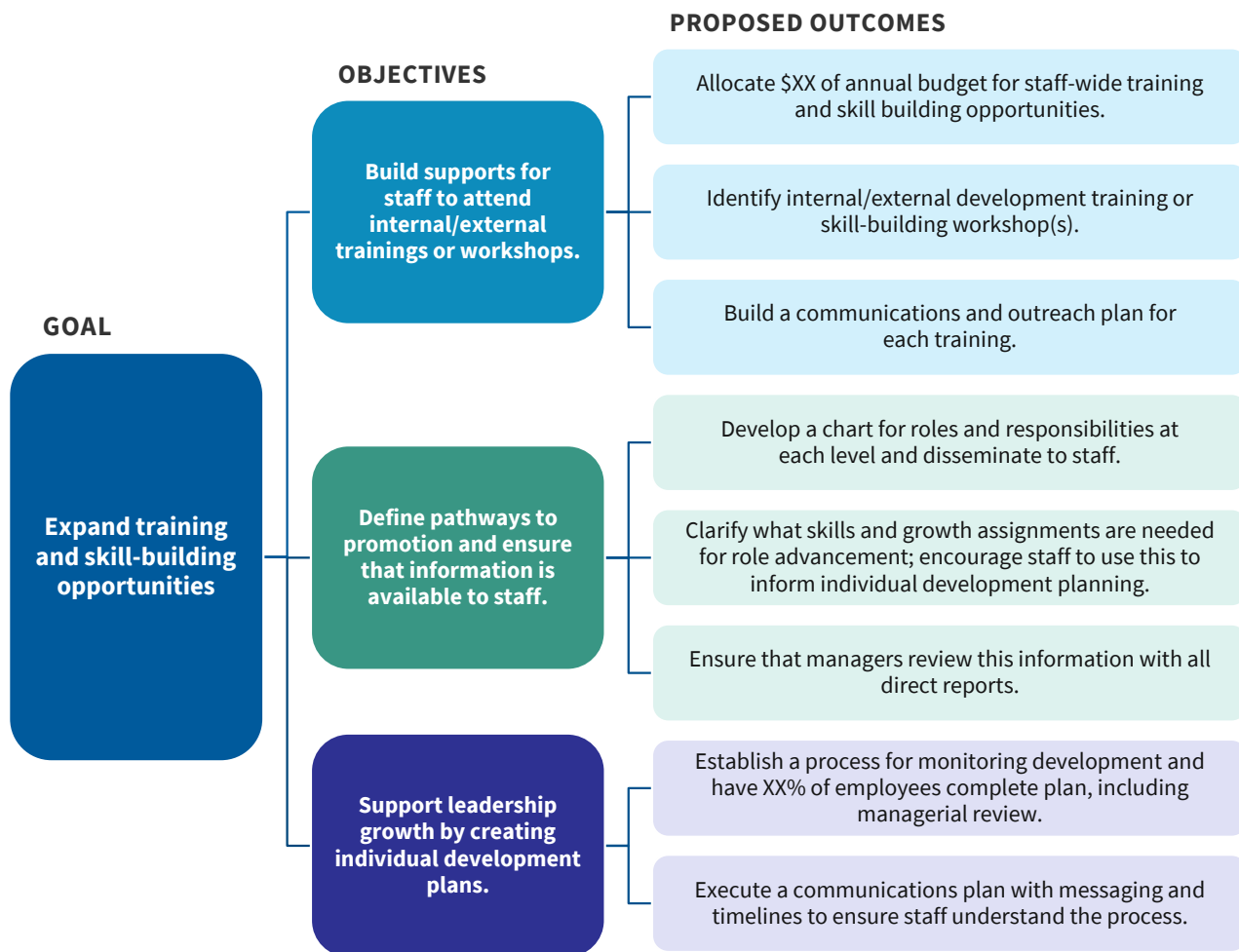
Developing a clear action plan for professional development can help expand access to opportunities, promote accountability, and measure progress toward a stronger leadership pipeline.

Checklist for creating a development action plan for your organization:

- ☐ **Set clear goals.** Identify the agency’s short- and long-term leadership development priorities and define measurable outcomes.
Example: Increase access to training for all staff by 25 percent over the next fiscal year.
- ☐ **Engage leadership and staff.** Secure buy in from executive leaders. Involving staff in identifying training needs and shaping priorities can be valuable.
Example: Conduct an annual staff survey to assess professional development interests and barriers to participation.
- ☐ **Define accountability and monitoring.** Clarify who is responsible for implementation and how progress will be tracked and reported (*see next section for more detail*).
Example: Include leadership development metrics in agency performance dashboards.

See **Exhibit 1** (*next page*) for a sample organizational development plan, including clear objectives and measurable outcomes.

Exhibit 1. Organizational Development Training Plan Example



4. Establish an Evaluation Plan to Monitor Efforts

An evaluation plan helps ensure that staff development efforts are coordinated, and progress is measured and visible. Connecting the vision and evaluation plan to broader strategic goals and related organizational planning can strengthen alignment, accountability, and long-term impact.

A mix of process, outcome, and experience measures are all important to evaluate how well efforts are working to build a pipeline of rising leaders. Measures may include staff retention, promotions, and participation in development opportunities. Engaging staff to identify meaningful measures, both qualitative and quantitative, can help ensure the evaluation reflects agency priorities and staff perspectives.

Checklist for developing an evaluation plan:

- ☐ **Track measurable outcomes.** Monitor promotions and participation in development opportunities to identify trends in advancement and participation in development activities across staff. Creating individual development plans is also a strong marker of staff support, providing clear insight into each person's growth and the agency's commitment to their advancement.
Example: Track the number of staff completing leadership training and analyze how participation correlates with subsequent promotions or expanded responsibilities.
- ☐ **Solicit feedback from staff.** Use evaluations or annual staff engagement surveys to collect staff input on the quality and impact of leadership development opportunities. Apply these insights to refine future efforts.
Example: Add questions to the agency's annual staff survey about the usefulness of training and mentorship programs, and use results to prioritize future topics or delivery formats.
- ☐ **Connect staff development to agency goals.** Connect staff development to broader agency objectives, such as enhancing member engagement or improving access and quality for members, to demonstrate how workforce development supports these goals.
Example: If an agency goal is to improve member communication, track whether staff completing related trainings report increased confidence in engaging with members.
- ☐ **Establish a clear timeline.** Determine how frequently to assess different measures, such as attendance at development training monthly, progress on staff development plans quarterly, and staff survey results annually.
Example: Incorporate development metrics into quarterly leadership dashboards to ensure regular review and timely adjustments to training or mentorship offerings.
- ☐ **Share evaluation results with all staff.** Communicate findings broadly, including key insights, changes since the last review, and additional actions needed to achieve goals. Make time for discussion.
Example: Present evaluation results at an all-staff meeting and host small group discussions to gather feedback on progress and next steps.

Conclusion

In an increasingly complex and rapidly changing Medicaid environment, organizational resilience depends on strong leadership at all levels. Many of today's senior Medicaid leaders [rose through the ranks of their agencies](#), underscoring the importance of investing in frontline and mid-level staff as a long-term strategy for cultivating organizational resiliency.

By proactively developing a leadership pipeline, agencies can minimize disruptions from turnover, respond effectively to emerging challenges, and ensure continuity in advancing agency priorities. Senior leaders play a vital role in setting a clear vision, identifying practical strategies, and fostering a learning culture that supports leadership development.

By using this guide, Medicaid agencies can implement actionable strategies to strengthen their leadership pipeline — improving operations and policy implementation today, while building the adaptive capacity needed to serve Medicaid members into the future.

