



Human Services  
Research Institute



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# Consensus Definition Supplement: Considering the Term ‘Home- and Community-Based Services’

## *HCBS Definition Project*

“Home- and community-based services,” or HCBS, is a widely used term in Medicaid, aging, disability, and long-term services and supports policy. However, HCBS is also a “term of art.” This means it is a specialized term that is familiar to many policymakers, Medicaid agencies, advocates, researchers, and service systems, but it may be less familiar to people outside those systems.

Members of the Consensus Panel noted that HCBS is most often used in the context of Medicaid, associated with Medicaid waivers, state plan services, managed long-term services and supports, and the [HCBS Settings Rule](#).

This **consensus definition** is intended to be broader than Medicaid. It is meant to support policy development, legislative drafting, advocacy, and communication **across populations, payers, and service systems**.

## HCBS and Medicaid

The term HCBS has strong roots in Medicaid policy. Many people hear “HCBS” and immediately think about Medicaid-funded services or waiver programs. This is understandable, because Medicaid is one of the major public funding sources for long-term services and supports for people who need help with daily activities.

However, the supports described in the consensus definition are not limited to Medicaid. Similar supports may be funded through Older Americans Act programs, veterans services, state-funded programs, managed care models, private pay, long-term care insurance, or other arrangements.

This creates a communication challenge. “HCBS” may be technically accurate in policy contexts, but it may not be the most meaningful term for all audiences.

A person receiving services may be more likely to say they get:

- Help at home
- Personal care
- Help with transportation
- Support to live independently
- Support to live at home with family
- Support at work or school
- Help from a direct support professional (DSP), aide, or in-home helper
- Support for family caregivers

This discussion of related terms is an attempt to bridge the technical policy language and more universally understood plain language without changing the core definition.

## Related and Alternative Terms

The environmental scan completed by HSRI noted that other terms, including **home care, supportive services, long-term services and supports (LTSS)**, and **community-based LTSS**, may be used to describe similar or overlapping services.

These terms are not always perfect substitutes for HCBS. It is useful to consider and provide guidance on how these terms may apply and be related to HCBS in different contexts.



| Term                                            | How it relates to HCBS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Long-term services and supports, or LTSS</b> | A broader umbrella term that can include both institutional services and HCBS. Useful in policy and financing discussions.                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Community-based LTSS</b>                     | More specific than LTSS and often closer to HCBS but still may not fully capture all services in the definition.                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Home care</b>                                | More familiar to the public, especially in aging services, but may sound narrower than HCBS and may not include employment, community participation, building skills in independent living, or service coordination. Potential to be confused with home health.                                                            |
| <b>Home health</b>                              | Usually refers to more clinical or medically oriented services delivered in the home, often under Medicare or Medicaid. It is not the same as HCBS, though service descriptions can overlap.                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Care at home</b>                             | A broader umbrella term used by some organizations to describe home health, hospice, palliative care, home care, and Medicaid HCBS. It may not include home modifications or community supports. This is useful in some communications, but potentially broader than HCBS if home-based medical service are also included. |
| <b>Community living supports</b>                | A strong plain-language alternative, especially in disability contexts. Emphasizes the purpose of services rather than the payer.                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Independent living supports</b>              | Useful when describing choice, autonomy, and self-direction, but may not fully capture people who need extensive supports.                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Personal care services</b>                   | A common HCBS example, but too narrow to stand in for HCBS as a whole because it does not include community integration and employment supports, technologies, and home modifications.                                                                                                                                     |

## Suggested Communication Framing

For technical and policy audiences, the term HCBS connects to existing funding and policy language.

For public-facing communication, there may be an acceptable shorter, plain-language explanation such as:

*Home- and Community-Based Services, or HCBS, are supports that help people live at home, take part in community life, and get help with daily activities, relationships, work, health, and independence.*

*HCBS are supports that help people live their lives at home and in their community, rather than in institutions.*

This framing keeps alignment with the technical term while making the meaning clearer to self-advocates, families, policymakers, providers, and the broader public.