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WHEN CLIENTS COMPLAIN:  
BUREAUCRATIC RESPONSIVENESS  
IN LARGE FEDERAL AGENCIES

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ABSTRACT

High error rates in entitlements and slow responses to client complaints by Federal agencies are analyzed from a market-power frame of reference focusing on the relative powerlessness of agency clients in relation to agencies which hold monopolies of life sustaining benefits. Data from a survey of Members of Congress are presented to provide an estimate of error rates. Three alternative structural solutions to the problem of unresponsiveness are assessed, including increased congressional casework service, ombudsmen services, and use of Federal Information Centers to aid clients. Necessary quality control procedures to facilitate each solution are described.

SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

The United States Veterans Administration (VA), and the Social Security Administration of the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare (SSA), are monopolies. They

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each have life-sustaining goods and services to dispense, such as medical care, pension checks, compensation payments, and educational support stipends. Each agency dispenses these goods and services to citizen-consumers, frequently called clients, according to statutes, regulations, policies and guidelines of entitlement which vary in specificity. If the citizen-consumer is dissatisfied with the service rendered, or is denied a benefit he feels entitled to, there are no competitor services to turn to. A government bureau lives on its annual budget grant from Congress (or the State), not upon the citizen-consumer's voluntary payments for purchases. Thus, the dissatisfied consumer has nothing of value to withhold from the bureaucracy to compel better service.

The nature of the relationship between the client and the government agency is fundamentally different from the market relationship between the customer and business enterprises, as has been noted by social welfare authors (Thompson, 1965). Two differences are most important. First, every supermarket, gas station or department store competes for the trade of the customer because the customer has something they want, money. If the customer is not happy at one gas station he may take his money and car to a competing one across the street. Competition between sellers, and the possession of money with which to buy, gives each consumer some power to either achieve satisfaction at one store or go elsewhere to obtain the product. However, the Medicaid recipient who is, for instance, denied payment for medical care, and the veteran whose monthly student stipend checks mysteriously cease have no competitor to whom to go and no purchase money to withhold (Lewis, 1975).

It is thus not surprising that large numbers of citizens, editorialists, and elected officials have found that the monopolistic, life sustaining government bureaus are frequently unresponsive to complaints of error or delays. (Carter, 1978; Technical Assistance Research Program, 1976; Gellhorn, 1967; Chiles, 1975.) The bureaus need not make fewer errors nor more rapid responses to complaints to survive and to grow, unlike a business enterprise in even a moderately competitive

environment. The same problems of errors and delay in entitlements are cross-cultural (Gellhorn, 1967), and are present in other, non-governmental monopolies, such as electric utilities (Singer, 1977).

The main purpose of this paper is to estimate from data gathered in 1975 the extent of the problem of bureaucratic unresponsiveness and error in entitlements, as measured by the volume of consumer complaints against federal and state bureaucracies dispensing life sustaining goods and services which were registered in the offices of Members of Congress. A lack of empirical data in the field has been described earlier by experts as a serious handicap to study and analysis of the client complaint problem (Kravitz, 1972). This paper will also describe and assess three remedies to increase responsiveness to clients and reduce errors in entitlements currently being used or actively considered in the Federal establishment. These remedies include increasing the capacity of the Members of Congress to process the complaints of more of their constituents by adding casework staff and by establishing a central complaint service bureau in Congress (Reuss, 1963; Hechler, 1969). We call this remedy the Political Solution. Complaint handling by Congressmen offers one distinctly attractive feature. It places the client in a role similar to a customer of a business, in that the client is a Congressman's constituent, and has a vote to cast or withhold. Thus, the client has some power. The second remedy, which we call the Executive Branch Solution, includes such strategies as the use of the Federal Information Centers, operated by the federal General Services Administration, to accept and process complaints by phone or letter, and to advocate with the bureaus for the client. (University Digest, Center for Governmental Responsibility, 1978.) Coupled with this approach are related technical-structural suggestions from consultants (Technical Assistance Research Reports, 1976, 1977) for improving internal control in the bureaus. The third remedy to be described and assessed is the Ombudsman Response, in which special or general purpose advocates are established high in government to deal with the bureaus on behalf of the client.

We will suggest that the actual scope of the problem of governmental delay and error in entitlements remains unclear because of poor record keeping and research, but that clearly the data which is available so far indicates the problem is mammoth. We will also suggest that any remedies for the problem, either Political, Executive, or Ombudsmen, to succeed will also require that the managerial cadres of the bureaus understand the principles of industrial quality control and of communication, and are able to utilize these principles. We argue that without sound programs of quality control, error rates and response delay rates will remain high, no matter the type of remedy applied. We will argue that in the absence of a market relationship between client and dispensing bureau, Congress should require and enforce quality control standards for errors and delays in the Executive branch agencies through manipulation of bureau budgets and executive promotional systems as the best defense for the client and society against error and unresponsiveness.

#### SECTION II: ELEMENTS OF BUREAUCRATIC UNRESPONSIVENESS

At least three kinds of official behavior are included in the widely used, but vague concept, bureaucratic unresponsiveness. It is important to distinguish between these behaviors for analysis and problem-solving.

First, the phrase bureaucratic unresponsiveness appears to cover extensive time delays between a client first contacting an agency with a problem and his receipt of a definitive reply. President Carter recently referred to this sense of the term when he said

When private citizens seek the simplest form of help from their government, too often they get only waits, unanswered letters, complicated forms, referrals to other agencies and plain inaction (Carter, May 26, 1978).

While clear standards for promptness of reply frequently do not seem to exist in the large government agencies (Technical Assistant Research Programs Report, December 1976), however a

meaningful response within three weeks is a measure now being used to establish national baseline rates. These researchers determined by analysis of a sample of complaints received at the national headquarters of eight service agencies that only two, the Public Health Service and the National Park Service, were able to respond to complaints within three weeks. Neither the massive V.A. nor the Social Security Administration, dealing with millions of Americans' health and income dollars, met this standard. Interestingly, in a study of ombudsman services in 9 nations, one researcher found that slowness in official decision-making and review is similarly a major source of citizen complaints. Our experience with SSA indicates that when complaints from citizens are forwarded through Congressional casework staffs, 3-9 day response times are the rule! Two other large, human service bureaus, Social and Rehabilitation Service of U.S.D.H.E.W. and the Manpower Administration of the Labor Department also failed the 3-week test. We should note of course that delay is also one way to not remedy an error. Singer has cogently described the process of overlong delays as a "delay circuit," a bureaucratic behavior aimed at avoiding confrontation with error and the need to make decisions (Singer, op. cit.).

A second element of responsiveness is clarity of the communication to the citizen. A timely response written in jargon, or in legal language beyond the reading level of the recipient, is of little value, and is as frustrating as is a long-delayed response. Effective administrative communication has been described by writers as requiring receiver comprehension and feedback (Ehlers, et al., 1976), and as a necessary link between executives, employees and clients (Bellows, 1960). Overuse of jargon and technical language is a frequently identified administrative problem (Ehlers, op. cit.), yet it seems to characterize most responses to complaints from the large service bureaus. A letter carrying an important decision or explanation might be judged to be clear if it would be clear from the point of view of the likely level of education and understanding of the writer of the complaint (Technical Assistance Research Report, October, 1976). While exact data is not available, our observations in one Congressional office (Rep. William Lehman, Florida) handling a high volume of client complaints is that overly legalistic, obscure, lengthy and jargon

filled writing characterize the bureau's communications and is incomprehensible to the poor, elderly, and the foreign born in particular.

The third element of bureaucratic behavior of concern, perhaps the most important, is the actual rate of errors made in decisions on entitlements, and the response speed at which these errors are rectified once the client calls attention to them by complaint. Of course, the possibilities for error are enormous in agencies which process millions of pension allocations, medical payments and similar decisions monthly. The bureaus carry out this work in a maze of regulations and rules which must frequently be interpreted by lower officials who have some discretionary power. In one national study in New Zealand it was found that most citizen complaints arose in discretionary situations where the citizen felt that a legitimate rule was being applied unfairly or unwisely in their case (Weeks, 1969). For instance, few people directly challenge the SSA rule that earned income must be reported, but many may challenge whether SSA has applied correctly the complex formula for deducting earned income from a particular pensioners check. Again, few would challenge the rule that Medicare will only pay for certain treatments for specific diseases. But, many will argue that an elderly, sick lady who has no way of knowing that an optional therapy ordered by her physician will be disallowed ought not to be billed to her. We may call these "discretionary errors" because they require individual official interpretations of varying sets of facts, and an official has several options available. "Absolute errors" are those such as arithmetic miscalculations or computer input mistakes which result in a client being paid too little, or not being paid at all. Reducing both types of error in service agencies is a valuable goal for management.

The process by which errors are repaired or resolved in an agency when a client complains or appeals is important. In order to repair errors, an organization needs policies and procedures which authorize and direct specific personnel to do so, linking the complaint receivers to reviewing authorities and then to decision makers. We call these linkages repair

circuits. The Technical Assistance Research Project (1976) found that the central offices of the social service bureaucracies did not have clear repair circuits. At the same time, surveys of these clients indicated the agencies had poor images to them (Ibid, 1976). Apparently the current baseline response time is so low and the time delays in the repair circuits so long that the complaint processing procedures which do exist actually harm agency images!

We cannot judge the extent to which any set of error complaints such as these by clients are accurate or unreasonable, especially in the discretionary areas, for the large bureaus without other detailed studies. But, data from the New York City Welfare Department may provide some hints. A new appeal unit there found that in 70% of clients appeals to the unit the agency staff resolved the problem immediately for the client. Apparently, most client complaints of discretionary or absolute error were correct. (Levinson, 1970)

The problems of complaints by clients and errors by agencies will probably always be with us to some extent. It is reasonable to state that any proposed efforts at reducing rates or remedying the errors should aim for goals of reducing verified errors, resolving client complaints fairly in a brief time period, and communicating official actions clearly to the client. Improvement in repair circuits, communication methods, and quality control standards will all be needed to achieve these goals.

### SECTION III: A SURVEY STUDY OF CLIENT COMPLAINTS TO MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

"Everyone of the 535 Senators and Congressmen in Washington is an ombudsman. ....Everyone of us knows it, and a great many of our constituents know it too," said former U.S. Senator Ed Gurney (Ibid, 1970, p. 5), describing the complaint handling and client advocacy service offered by most Members of Congress, both Senators and Representatives (Hereafter Members of Congress are referred to as Members. This convention describes both males and females.). Congressional casework is the term generally used to describe services to constituents by Members aimed at helping constituents resolve personal problems relating to Social Security, Veterans benefits,

unemployment claims and similar social service entitlements (Butler, 1966). The service is usually short-term, it may be carried out mostly by phone or letter. Casework here does not connote a treatment relationship. However, the term casework is occasionally also used to describe broader services, such as aiding a corporation with a federal regulatory body. The volume of constituent clients who ask a Member and his staff to help them with an entitlement case the client believes to represent an error or a needless delay is one valuable indicator of the scope of the error problem. Further, data gathered from Congressional casework services may be used to roughly gauge which federal services seem less responsive, which more. Such data may also be useful in comparing the responsiveness of the repair circuits activated by the client alone, and activated by the client and Member together. This section describes previous reported attempts to measure congressional casework, and data from our survey study of Congressional casework.

#### HISTORY OF RESEARCH ON CONGRESSIONAL CASEWORK

Congress first formally concerned itself with the scope of casework services in 1945, during hearings on the Organization and Work of the Congress (U.S. Congress, Joint Committee, 1945). Representative Benjamin Wallace urged an empirical study be begun to provide more exact data than was being gathered through the hearings, which were primarily impressionistic (Ibid., 1945, p. 910). By 1966 four studies based on samples of from 10 to 160 Congressional offices were completed and reported (Clapp, 1963; Davidson, 1965; Saloma, 1966; Gellhorn, 1966). None gathered data on complaints against specific federal agencies.

Saloma (op. cit.) approached the question by studying casework mail volume and staff time utilization. In the sample offices, casework mail accounted for an average of 15.4% of total mail, with some offices reporting casework mail as 40% of their total. Casework complaints were reported by the Members studied to be the second largest claim on their time.

Gellhorn (op. cit.) studied a sample of 10 offices of Members of the House of Representatives. He found that an

average of 124 letters per week were received concerning individual cases. However, his definition was more broad than that given above and included some materials not usually classified as casework complaints. He calculated that 51 new cases per week were dealt with in each office in his sample.

Gellhorn had several reservations about his data, including the possibility of high fluctuations in volume over time, and possible duplications of cases. However, this study merits attention because it developed a baseline of cases.

Davidson's (op. cit.) study found that 78% of Congressmen felt casework intervention should be part of their job, but that 58% felt it was too great a burden on their time.

Clapp (op. cit.) found that most Congressional staff time was spent on such constituent affairs as casework complaints.

Kravitz (1972), writing for the Congressional Research Service, summarized the studies to that date and bemoaned the lack of quality, data-based studies. He noted the particular need to quantify requests for help according to the agency involved, to assess the success of Member interventions, and to quantify the number of new cases occurring. He did not disagree with Gellhorn's 1966 conclusion that the volume of complaint cases appeared to be rising.

#### SURVEY METHOD

For the purposes of this study Congressional Casework was defined as the process involving utilization of the Congressman (Senator) and his staff with an individual constituent or family in solving problems with governmental agencies. Congressional staff were instructed to not include in their response "assistance given to groups, associations or other organizations."

An anonymous questionnaire was sent to 100% of the Members of Congress (N=535), with a letter from a Member introducing the survey as scholarly research. 125 Member's offices returned the questionnaire (24%).

## FINDINGS

The staff directors were asked to list the 5 government agencies their records showed were most frequently contacted concerning client-constituent complaints. As Table I indicates, the bureaus responsible for the large pension, health, and welfare programs are the most frequent targets of casework service.

The Social Security Administration operates the Social Security pension system, several forms of income assistance, and the Medicare program of health insurance. Ninety-two of 125 (73.5%) offices considered the agency the main target of their efforts. The Social Security complaint rate was followed by the U.S. Veteran's Administration, the administrator of the Veterans disability and pension systems, health care system (it is the nation's largest hospital operator), home mortgage guarantee program, and the student stipend program for veterans.

The offices were asked to report the average number of new casework cases handled by their offices during the year. One hundred sixteen offices responded, reporting an average of 85 new cases weekly. Only a few reported less than 25 new cases per week. Recalling the earlier report by a leading scholar in the field of citizen complaints and Congressional activity (Gellhorn, 1966) of an average new case rate of 51 per week, the data from this much larger sample indicates a 66% increase in volume over a nine year period. If all 535 Members of Congress serve the same number of new cases per week, then about 2,000,000 per year are served or reported. Allowing for duplications (e.g. the same client contacting two or more Members) errors in records, and possible sample bias, we still may conclude that a very large number of clients, perhaps as much as 3/4 of 1% of the population, use Congressional casework services, primarily with health and welfare agencies.

Eighty five percent of the offices believed the volume of casework was increasing over the previous year by an average of 24%.

TABLE 1  
 FEDERAL AGENCIES GENERATING CLIENT-CONSTITUENT  
 COMPLAINTS, MEASURED BY RECORDS OF CONGRESSIONAL STAFFS

FEDERAL AGENCY NAME	NUMBER OF CONGRESSIONAL OFFICES RATING AGENCY AS GENERATING MOST COMPLAINTS*	NUMBER OF CONGRESSIONAL OFFICES RATING AGENCY AS GENERATING 2nd MOST COMPLAINTS	TOTAL RATING AGENCY, FIRST OR SECOND MOST FREQUENT
Social Security Administration	76	16	92 (73.5%)
Veteran's Administration	12	58	70 (56%)
Other HEW Bureaus	9	6	15 (12%)
Defense Department	12	23	35 (28%)
Immigration Naturalization Service	2	3	5 (4%)

\*Column total is less than 125. 14 Members rated one of 8 other agencies as most frequent source of complaint.

TABLE II  
CONGRESSIONAL STAFF SELF-RATING OF SUCCESS IN RESOLVING COMPLAINTS

<u>NUMBER OF CONGRESSIONAL OFFICERS</u>	<u>SUCCESS RATE</u>
10	0-25%
37	26-50%
51	51-75%
13	76-100%

When asked to rate their own effectiveness in solving constituent problems, the Congressional staff's estimated their own success, as shown on Table II. Uncorroborated positive self-evaluations must always be viewed with caution, of course.

#### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The descriptive data gathered by questionnaire reported here adds further concrete information to our knowledge base about client complaints of error and delay by federal social service bureaus. The data indicates that a very large number of Americans have sufficient difficulties with the bureaus administering important entitlements that they go to their Senators or Congressmen to importune for help. The clients' most frequent complaints are against the Social Security Administration and the Veterans Administration. This survey research supplements and tends to corroborate work a decade earlier which showed somewhat lower, but increasing, volumes of casework (Gellhorn, op. cit.). More recent research describing excessive delays in responding to complaints in the same federal agencies (Technical Assistance Research Reports, op. cit.) may offer one explanation why so many people resort to their Congressman for aid.

More data is needed on this important subject. It would be particularly valuable to carry out a public opinion study of clients who have used Congressional casework service to determine their levels of satisfaction, and to compare this information with existing data on the satisfaction levels of clients using complaint services offered by the bureaus themselves. A sample study of both complaints lodged with the bureaus and with Congressmen to determine a base rate of actual error is a crucial, unmet gap.

#### SECTION IV: ALTERNATIVE METHODS OF REDUCING ERROR AND INCREASING RESPONSIVENESS TO SOCIAL SERVICE CONSUMERS

This paper noted earlier that the nature of the market relationship between a government agency and its clients is monopolistic. There are no competing sources of veteran's stipends or Medicare reimbursements for doctor's expenses. We also noted that clients are without power in this market;

If they do not claim an entitlement the bureau loses nothing. Clients have nothing of value to withhold from bureaus because bureaus live on their annual budgets from Congress. It has been demonstrated by other writers that clients are routinely dissatisfied with the bureaus, both for absolute errors and for discretionary errors. Failure to respond at all to complaints or lengthy response delays have been documented, and at least one writer (Singer, op. cit.) has argued that these delays are purposeful behavior by both public and private monopolies. Reducing these delays and error rates, and increasing the understandability of written communication to clients are social and administrative goals worth pursuing to improve service to clients.

This section will analyze three commonly proposed alternative programs to improve responsiveness and lower error rates. Each alternative will be evaluated from the point of view of how they do or do not promise to alter the market relationships which we view as the root of the problem. We shall also consider the political viability of each. The third aspect to be evaluated will be technical feasibility, that is, the degree to which a proposed program's needed administrative structures and technologies are available to, and are useable in the large social welfare agencies of government. The fourth aspect to be assessed is whether the solution holds promise of providing systematic improvement, or only improved responses to particular cases.

#### OMBUDSMAN FOR AMERICA

The classic, Scandinavian model of the ombudsman defines that person as an independent, high ranking official who receives complaints from the public about governmental actions, investigates complaints of all types, has access to agency files, may usually compel agencies to explain their actions, and may recommend remedies for both individual cases and for general problems. (Levinson, op. cit.) Many countries in the Capitalist, Socialist, and Third World sectors have adopted some form of ombudsman model to assist citizens (Gellhorn, 1967). Legislation to establish a U.S. Ombudsman Office has been introduced and defeated in Congress many times since 1965 (Weeks, 1969), but several states have enacted

specialized or general ombudsman offices. For example, Minnesota has an ombudsman for its prisoners, and Florida has ombudsman committees for nursing home patients and those in institutions for the retarded. New Jersey and Nebraska have a state-wide ombudsman, following Hawaii, the first state to adopt Ombudsman legislation. (Gellhorn, 1970) There are wide variations in the level of authority, breadth of jurisdiction, independence and authority to compel compliance in the various ombudsman offices. In no instance could the writers locate an elected ombudsman. The slow increase in the development of specialized and state level ombudsman programs has paralleled the growth of the consumer movement and the human rights movements.

The ombudsman service usually operates by taking complaints from the public, and then carrying out staff investigations. In the Scandinavian model, the staff have access to official files and may compel agency staff to respond to questioning. If the ombudsman office is highly placed, reporting to the Governor or Prime Minister, the recommendations for remediation in cases, and for changes in agency systems or policies carry great force. The ombudsman offices in Scandinavia serve all citizens with any important complaint against the government.

Would ombudsman services change the market and power relationships between U.S. clients and the federal social welfare agencies? At least two features would need to be present to do so. First, the federal agencies would need to perceive that the interest of the ombudsman in a case had potential positive or negative consequences to them. If the agency perceives that the good will or political power of the ombudsman is valuable (or dangerous) to it, we can predict the development of speedy repair circuits tuned towards the ombudsman staff. For instance, if an ombudsman can affect an agency appropriation, or the career of a high executive of an agency, or an agencies press image, we would expect to see agency responsiveness increase. A second necessary feature for success would be the perception by the ombudsman that the client had something of value to the ombudsman, to give or to withhold as a consumer. If the good will or support of clients is necessary for the

ombudsman to retain office, then it could be predicted the office will act promptly and persistently to aid cases it sees as just, and to deal courteously with those clients it believes do not have well-founded cases. Ombudsman offices which meet these tests would have the ability to alter the market power relations now prevailing between clients and agencies.

The political viability of proposals for high-power ombudsman offices is not good in this country. Congress has consistently refused to establish a federal ombudsman office. It is widely concluded that Members of Congress prefer to serve complaint cases and thus oppose any proposal to establish a competitor or remove the function from them. (Anderson, 1969; Gellhorn, 1970; Anderson, 1972) Representative Ken Hechler probably spoke for most Members when he said in 1969 "...it would be an abdication of our responsibilities as Members of Congress if casework were turned over to an ombudsman...." (Anderson, op. cit., p. 16) It has been asserted that legislators at the state and federal level perceive that casework serves their best interests. (Gellhorn, 1970) That interest is widely perceived to be votes. An old adage in Congressional circles is that "One satisfied constituent equals ten votes on election day." Despite fervent statements like Hechler's, it is clear that a Members federally paid staff of 3-10 caseworkers, generating an average of three appeal and complaint letters per case (Butler, op. cit.), must help many people, most of whom can be expected to be grateful on election day. A modest proposal to merely provide a central Congressional Complaint Office to serve all Congressmen has repeatedly failed. (Anderson, 1969)

The political opposition to proposals for high power ombudsman offices also includes the V.A. bureaucracy. It has regularly testified against ombudsman proposals. The V.A. argues that the Veterans Representatives and veterans group's contact persons do the advocacy job well enough. (Anderson, 1969)

The low probability that high power ombudsman offices will be enacted is reflected in the recent decline in legislative proposals, and in scholarship in the area from the 1965-1970 peak of interest. However, specialized and state

level ombudsman offices are still slowly developing. Rarely do they possess high political power as defined here, or as is common in Scandinavia.

The federal agencies would find it necessary to establish complaint-liaison officers to deal with an ombudsman's staff. This role would require access to files, the ability to cross internal departmental authority lines, the power to recommend to a high authority in the agency action to be taken to rectify errors, and to reply to the ombudsman rapidly. Such technical abilities could only be based on vastly improved complaint files and procedures. Each agency would need to designate an executive who could issue rectifying orders rapidly all through the agency. These changes appear feasible, though expensive.

The federal ombudsman proposal has the very attractive feature of potentially stimulating system-wide changes in agencies in how complaints are processed. The actual rates of error in entitlement decisions could be positively affected. A large federal ombudsman program could handle enough cases to detect systematic problems. Data based reports from large numbers of cases and policy recommendations could be influential. However, because no known ombudsman programs in the U.S. have any direct control over service agency budgets and appointments, and are frequently only advisory, their ability to bring about procedural changes varies greatly and is rarely high.

#### SECTION V: CONGRESSIONAL CASEWORK SERVICES

Good Congressional caseworkers are a valuable commodity in short supply. New Congressmen have been advised by experienced Members to seek and hold onto good ones. (Tacheron and Udall, 1966) While it is not known exactly how many Members offer extensive casework service, we uncovered none in our sample which did not do some. Each of the 435 Members of the House of Representatives has at least one District Office and a Washington Office, while the 100 Senators have Washington Offices and often two or more state offices. There are thus at least 535 offices in the various states to which a citizen may take a complaint, if he or she is aware of the service. Congressmen often aggressively seek out client-constituents

through mobile service offices with well publicized routes, and through newsletters mailed free to each household represented by the office-holder.

Members offer casework service to their constituents for two reasons. One is "...some Members and their staffs sincerely believe that with the increasing complexity and scope of government involvements in the daily lives of citizens, the Congressman serves as one of the few remaining links between the individual and a depersonalized state." (Butler, op. cit., p. 5) And, they know their clout helps. (Butler, op. cit.) Another reason is that they believe casework gets votes. (Gellhorn, 1970) Referring specifically to casework to help people with social security and veterans benefits, one Member lauded his staff recently and noted about the clients that in the upcoming election "...they're going to support me." (Burke, Miami Herald, June 4, 1978)

The fact that a social security pensioner with a complaint is also a voter gives him something of value to proffer or withhold from a Member. A constituent's vote, and his help telling his spouse and friends to vote, are the currency of electoral politics. Thus, according to our theory it is predictable that many Members will have aggressive, large casework services, and that these services will generate a high level of inquiry and appeal calls and letters promptly for constituents. An implied quid pro quo relationship exists between Member and constituent.<sup>1</sup>

Members sit on appropriations and oversight committees which control the budgets of the agencies. An agency which consistently causes trouble for a Senator who sits on a key appropriations committee incurs a genuine danger. Even a critical press release from a Member can cause harm to an agency temporarily, and to the career of an official in the

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<sup>1</sup>Campaign Committees of a Member may purchase the computerized lists of names a Member has aided. Thus, they may be campaigned to personally by letter or phone and enlisted to aid the re-election bid of the Member who helped them.

agency, as well. Thus the agencies perceive that the good will of a Member is a commodity of great value.

We conclude that Congressional casework services do change the market power relationship between clients and agencies. Members need the votes of clients, and agencies need the votes of the Members. The expansion of this service so that it is available to all clients who need it may be argued from this basis alone.

The political viability of the current, uneven level, of Congressional casework is secure. Should Congress choose to expand their staffs to increase constituent services, it is probable that a majority could be assembled to do so.

Congressional casework has already spawned a network of liaison workers in the agencies who respond to the vast flow of calls and letters from Congressional aides. These liaison workers operate at local, regional and national levels. Repair circuits are in place between the bureaus and the Congressional caseworkers, but they have not been closely studied. Experience in one Member's office (where the second author is the Member's principal aide) indicates that the Regional Social Security Administration office routinely responds to staff in 9 days or less, a dramatic difference from the observation that client complaints rarely are served in less than three weeks. Apparently, these Congressional repair circuits are closely linked to executives of sufficient power to rectify errors and settle cases. The exact scope and size of the liaison-repair circuits is not known. However, in 1966 the Executive Department's central offices alone had 500 Congressional liaison staff at work, handling casework as well as legislative matters (Butler, op. cit.).

Congressional casework seems unlikely to spawn systematic improvements in error rates, nor systematic improvements in the speed and clarity of the federal agency's responses to clients. The casework system is idiosyncratic, depending entirely on the Member's interests and beliefs and security in office. One Member may offer extensive services to constituents, while the next little or none if he so desires. Each case is dealt with separately with no one apparently aggregating complaint and error data systematically. The system may help individuals,

case by case, but without general standards and records which are comparable across the 535 Members offices there is little prospect that meaningful system level changes will ensue. Skilled caseworkers will continue to advocate for clients with individual liaison workers, case by case.

#### FEDERAL COMPLAINT SERVICE

The General Services Administration of the United States is exploring the use of operatives in its network of Federal Information Centers (FIC) offices nationwide to aid citizens with complaints. By calling a no-toll number in an experimental state, citizens will be offered help by clerical employees in effecting complaints and remedying errors with federal agencies. Accurate records on complaints will be maintained and GSA will receive reports on complaint origins and types of resolution. User satisfaction surveys are possible. It is hoped that the GSA experiment will provide a universal service which helps clients and which can aggregate data useful to the Executive branch in improving management. While consciously planned after the Congressional casework model, this experiment will not provide face-to-face service, except for those who might live near the two centers in the experimental state (University Digest, February 7, 1978).

The FIC approach to casework would need to be politically acceptable to the Members of Congress to be established nationwide. The history of Ombudsman legislation would point to a limited chance for enactment if the program is perceived as a substitute for Congressional casework. If the program is seen as supplemental to the effort of the Members' own staff, it may have a viable future.

An exceedingly attractive feature of the FIC experiment is that it offers the possibility of aggregating accurate complaint data in each FIC district to help fill in the huge information gaps about complaint rates, agency response speed and style, and client variables.

The FIC approach can partially alter the market power relationships at the point at which its reports and reviews of agency error and complaint performance are seen by the

agencies as having the power to influence appropriations or executive careers. At this time, GSA has no such power of its own. However, the GSA can transmit "efficiency" reports to the President and Cabinet officers. If the Secretaries and President chose, they can set goals for error reduction and client satisfaction, and then use the FIC reports to assess progress. A second question is, does the client with a complaint have anything of value to offer to FIC to obtain rapid, courteous, aggressive help? Nothing is perceived comparable to the vote and good will that the same client has to exchange with a Member who is of help. As a result, it is uncertain whether the FIC clerical staff will produce results comparable to a Member of Congress.

Only Congressional casework provides at this time for an altered market power relationship between individual clients and the federal agencies controlling the life-sustaining entitlements. This power-change is relevant to the client in remedying the particular error and is not transferred to him personally. It is temporary power. Casework by Members is discretionary, thus quite an uneven resource from District to District.

Higher than acceptable error rates and slower than acceptable complaint response times indicate that the agencies have not developed modern quality control systems and error repair circuits for their products, the entitlements of pensions, stipends, and health care payments given to their "customers." Rapid responses to Members of Congress indicates that when these high-power persons advocate for a client, error repair circuits are promptly activated. A review of the elements of modern quality control systems will indicate the structures necessary to systematically lower error rates and speed response times for ordinary clients. A review of social welfare administration textbooks commonly used to train graduate managers will be described, pointing to generally inadequate treatment of quality control.

#### SECTION VI: ELEMENTS OF QUALITY CONTROL

Quality control systems are routine organizational procedures by which products and services are regularly sampled by inspectors and compared with norms and standards for

quality and quantity of product before delivery to the consumer. Products which do not meet standards of tolerance are rejected. High reject rates trigger problem-solving efforts by management which receives regular quality control reports. (Shewhart, 1932) Such systems in industry reject calculators which don't add, reject batches of drugs which are incorrectly formulated, and approve or reject aircraft engines, for example. While not perfect, quality control systems function to keep errors in tolerable limits and to signal system level problems. White (1950) noted the elements of quality control which should be present in social welfare services. These include the formulation of measureable, minimum standards of services, the carrying out of continuous sample studies of cases, charting the results on control charts for use by management, and establishing indexes of performance by agency units. Managers would use these procedures to monitor quality, to supervise supervisors, and to seek the cause of high levels of error. It might be added that linking executive retention and promotion to low error rates in entitlement decisions in divisions under that executive would give added dimension to quality control systems.<sup>2</sup>

The accuracy of entitlement grants and reimbursements to clients are subjects for which measureable standards might be formulated and enforced. Routine reviews of samples of payments and of discretionary decisions would be necessary. Quality control personnel could detect changes in error rates which would be visible to executives in routine reports. Response times to complaints, complaint rates, and clarity of letters to clients are also subject to clear standard setting and quality inspection. Social Security calculations, Medicare reimbursements, and decisions about V.A. student support checks are not mysteries. They are measureable events, and as such subject to modern quality control adapted correctly

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<sup>2</sup>The Civil Service Reform and Reorganization introduced by President Carter provides for rewarding high performance executives and managers with bonuses, as in industry, and dismissing consistently poor executives. This proposal covers executives at the current GS-16 to Executive Level IX pay grades, the Senior Executives, as well as the 72,000 managers in GS-13 through GS-16 grades. (White House Summary, April, 1978)

by professional managers.<sup>3</sup>

#### TEACHING QUALITY CONTROL METHODS

After White's pioneer Social Welfare text (White, 1950) administration texts commonly used by management students in graduate schools of social work have given scant attention to the methods of implementing quality control in social services. Two texts published with the support of national professional social work bodies do not cover quality control methods. Both devote space to the related subjects of program evaluation and accountability systems. Both allude to controlling and central management process, but do not relate this generalized concept to the specific elements of standard setting and sampling which are a part of modern quality control. (Schatz, 1970; Trecker, 1971) A recent text which does admirably discuss the specific problems in utilizing written communication to clients, also fails to cover quality control methods (Ehlers, op. cit.). The most recent text published by the official Council on Social Work Education Slavin, (1978) also fails to discuss quality control. It does however, allude to the use of client satisfaction as a measure of agency performance, a related concept (Hoshino, 1978). One popular business text sometimes used in social work courses does provide detailed exposure to the principles and steps in quality control, including the development of standards, measurements, sampling, control points, and corrections of deviations from standards. (Koontz and O'Donnell, 1972, 1978) Social Work students and teachers must themselves apply the concepts to appropriate social services situations. It must be concluded that most social work administration trainees continue to be educated without texts which cover quality control as an essential skill for managers to use to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

Error repair circuits describe the set of structures and procedures in an organization which come into play auto-

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<sup>3</sup>The Department of Health, Education and Welfare is now establishing error rate norms for payment errors in its aid programs (UPI, July 11, 1978). However, it is unclear how or if adversely affected clients who complain will receive faster responses.

matically when an outsider, a client or customer, complains of error to a representative of the agency. Error repair circuits which would enable the agencies to respond definitively to complaints within three weeks would necessarily include the following elements:

1. Easily accessible complaint receiving staff who's whereabouts are well known to the public, and who are in sufficient numbers to treat complaining clients as dignified individuals;
2. An executive clearly responsible for aiding this staff in carrying out rapid investigations;
3. An executive with sufficient authority to interpret rules, judge complaints, and order either remediation of errors or rejection of the complaint;
4. Monitoring of standards of communication which require that letters be written which are understandable by clients (which unfortunately suggests the level of 5th or 6th grade in most cases);
5. Record keeping systems which track complaint cases from receipt to resolution to determine timeliness;
6. Record systems which aggregate complaint data for use by executives to assess procedures and correct personnel and procedures; and
7. Executive utilization of the aggregate data.

Modern quality control systems, coupled with rewards to agencies and executives who perform with low error rates can produce sharp improvements in services to clients with low market power. Cabinet Secretaries are free to establish and enforce quality control standards, and one has done so at least in the case of requiring states to not exceed certain error levels in their AFDC programs. Error repair circuits which respond quickly to client complaints are a necessary ingredient in large agencies dispensing valuable entitlements if they are to repair their errors and retain the support of citizen-clients.

#### SECTION VII: SUMMARY

This article has argued that high error rates in federal entitlement dispensing agencies and slow responses to complaining clients results primarily from the monopolistic nature of the market relationship between clients and agencies.

Secondarily, we also argue that the absence of quality control systems, and error repair circuits tuned to clients, make it unlikely that error rates and response times will fall. The absence of these systems also reflects the low power of the clients. Data was presented on the magnitude of Congressional Casework efforts serving clients who complain to Members about government services. Three approaches including continued Congressional casework, were assessed for their probable ability to lower error rates, to provoke system level improvements, to change the power relationships between agencies and clients, and to be enacted politically. Congressional casework met the criteria of changing power relations and being politically acceptable, although it has distinct weaknesses. Two other solutions were assessed and regrettably judged either politically unfeasible or having too little power to change relationships. One of the two most frequently complained against bureaus (HEW's Social Security Administration and the related Supplemental Security Income Program) has taken the initial step of setting a 4% standard of tolerance for payment errors.

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