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Tiffany Taylor  
*Kent State University*

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# Paperwork First, not Work First: How Caseworkers Use Paperwork to Feel Effective

TIFFANY TAYLOR

Kent State University  
Department of Sociology

*A great deal of research has explored welfare agency caseworkers, especially how they use discretion. Paperwork in county welfare bureaucracies, however, is often taken-for-granted by caseworkers and researchers studying welfare. In this case study of a county welfare program in rural North Carolina, I focus on how caseworkers use paperwork through document analysis, interviews, and observation data. My findings illustrate caseworkers spend far more time on paperwork than they actually spend assisting program participants find employment. Finally, I show how caseworkers use paperwork to feel effective in a job that offers little to help clients move from welfare to work.*

*Key words: welfare, poverty, TANF, workfare, rural, organization, goals, success, casework*

Over the past decade, politicians and the press alike have claimed that welfare reform works (Harris & Parisi, 2008; Rogers-Dillon & Skrentny, 1999). Despite these claims, many researchers question the success of welfare reform (Hao & Cherlin, 2004; Lichter & Jayakody, 2002; Rogers-Dillon, 2004). Since 1996, and until the recent recession, many welfare participants in the United States have found some type of employment after leaving welfare. It is not clear how much of this increase in employment is attributable to welfare services or if the employment is stable. Further, welfare participants across the United States have difficulty finding full-time, full-year employment. The jobs available to participants are low-skill,

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low-wage jobs that offer little to no upward mobility (Butler, Corbett, Bond, & Hastedt, 2008; Corcoran, Danziger, Kalil, & Seedfeldt, 2000; Harris & Parisi, 2008; Hennessy, 2005). The most consistent finding concerning the effects of welfare reform on employment is that the number of families classified as working poor has increased dramatically (Lichter & Jayakody, 2002; Corcoran et al., 2000; Hennessy, 2005; O'Connor, 2000). Despite these challenges, welfare agencies argue they help program participants reach self-sufficiency.

This paper is a case study of a rural county welfare agency in North Carolina that examines how caseworkers use paperwork as a means to feel effective. While paperwork in social services offices has been taken as a given, how caseworkers use paperwork to feel effective within the constraints of bureaucracy has not been explored. Being good at paperwork allows caseworkers to feel effective within a program that offers caseworkers little room to successfully assist clients. Finally, in this paper, I also answer the call of Lichter and Jayakody (2002) to examine welfare reform in rural areas, which remain understudied despite their unique, and arguably greater, challenges in comparison to urban areas.

### Literature Review

Nearly fifty years ago, Peter M. Blau (1963) conducted comparative case studies of a state employment service agency and a federal enforcement agency. He found rules were often stretched and bent to improve individual job performance. Statistical performance evaluations removed personal feelings and lessened the risk of conflict between supervisors and line workers. Finally, he found paperwork was often a tool workers used to improve performance evaluations, even if this took a little exaggeration. In this setting of the employment agency, workers looked out for themselves, often at the expense of the client.

Three decades ago, Lipsky (1980) argued public service street-level bureaucrats struggle with effectiveness working in jobs that require them to negotiate contradictory job demands of helping people, while simultaneously being agents of social control. For welfare street-level bureaucrats, the daily work of welfare service provision has changed considerably since the

passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). This reform overhauled Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), creating Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and a complex new set of rules for welfare street-level bureaucrats to follow and enforce (Ridzi 2004, 2009). TANF participants would be required to work, they would have time limits to their assistance, and they would have “family caps” that prohibited additional cash assistance if the program participant became pregnant while receiving cash assistance.

Shortly after PRWORA passed, Hays (2003) studied caseworkers’ efforts to deal with this new welfare system that increased the social control aspect of workers’ jobs. She found that caseworkers actively resisted these punitive measures and bent the rules to help clients. Several years after Hays’ time in the field, welfare was reauthorized and a new requirement increased the number of participants that welfare agencies and caseworkers needed to get into “work-related activities.” Some recent research (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007; Ridzi, 2004, 2009) suggests that re-structuring welfare agencies, ideological buy-in among staff, and the demanding and competitive performance measures have combined to create a substantial shift in how programs for the poor are implemented. Additional research (Ricucci, 2005; Ricucci, Meyers, Lurie, & Han, 2004; Watkins-Hayes, 2009) finds more variation in the level of staff buy-in to what Ridzi (2009) terms the “common sense” of welfare reform. By and large, though, caseworkers have little choice but to meet the demands of county, state, and federal performance measures. Further, welfare-to-work remains an ineffective program in helping clients gain steady employment, much less become self-sufficient (Collins & Mayer, 2010; Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007; Ridzi 2009).

Given that helping participants reach self-sufficiency seems impossible and the rules and demands of implementing welfare policy continue to grow, it is important to understand how workers cope with such conditions. Thirty years ago, Lipsky (1980) argued caseworkers were too busy doing paperwork to do quality casework. Based on her recent case studies in Massachusetts, Watkins-Hayes (2009) finds caseworkers get multiple cues that paperwork processing is more important than social work to agencies. My findings are consistent, but I

also argue caseworkers focus on completing paperwork to feel like they are effective in their jobs. Further, caseworkers use the paperwork to protect themselves from being blamed for any wrongdoing. While paperwork is externally required and burdensome to doing effective social work, it also becomes a tool for caseworkers to feel effective in a very constrained and often emotionally draining job.

### Location and Methods

The location chosen, Smithgrove County, was selected for theoretical reasons. Smithgrove County is in eastern North Carolina, where the economy has centered on cotton agriculture and textile manufacturing in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Several small cities grew from mill towns that textile manufacturers constructed when they sought cheap labor that was socially and geographically isolated (Wood, 1986). Wealthy southerners essentially invited these firms to exploit the desperately poor White farmers as mill laborers, while using already exploited Black tenant and sharecropping farmers for their supply of cotton (Tomaskovic-Devey & Roscigno, 1996, 1997). This economic development set into motion decades of worker exploitation and poverty (Anderson, Schulman, & Wood, 2000; Wood, 1986). Smithgrove County's racial makeup was attractive to companies at the time, and still today Blacks make up a larger percentage of the population in Smithgrove County (53% compared to White, non-Hispanics 43% and 4% of the population comprising other racial categories, according to 2000 Census data).

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2007 when the data were being collected, Smithgrove County was among 200 U.S. counties with the highest poverty and unemployment. More than a quarter of Smithgrove County's population was living in poverty (more than double the North Carolina average) and more than 9 percent were unemployed (which is much higher than the NC rate of 5.5 percent). These figures simply illustrate Smithgrove County residents face tough conditions that show little promise of improving. Work opportunities are not plentiful and most jobs that are currently available offer very low wages.

Smithgrove County and the eastern part of the state

never diversified their industrial base. This lack of industrial diversity proved disastrous for the economy by 2000. When the textile and apparel industries moved further south (first to the U.S. Deep South and then to Central America) for cheaper labor, many people in this region were left without jobs (Anderson et al., 2000). In 2007, The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported retail as the largest industry in the county, and the jobs in this sector paid less than \$20,000 a year. The county also has a high number of program participants reaching time limits (24 months in North Carolina) because they are not able to find work.

### *Methods*

Data collection for this case study occurred from June 2006 until June 2007. As a case study, I use several methods in this project, including document analysis, participant observation and formal and informal interviews. There are a number of benefits to using multiple methods in research. For instance, by interviewing, I learn what caseworkers say they do and how they feel. By observing, I see what caseworkers actually do, including actions that they may take for granted. The various methods, then, serve as a check and balance, improving the reliability and validity of the data and findings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1998).

The first step in the research was to conduct a thorough review of the policies and procedures relevant to welfare history and policy in the United States, North Carolina, and Smithgrove County. These included training manuals from the job-readiness class, performance reviews, Work First policy manuals, and a variety of forms used by caseworkers and participants on a daily basis. This allowed me to develop an understanding of the historical, social, political, and economic development of Smithgrove County, as well as county, state, and federal welfare policy. This incredible paper trail also raised my awareness to the importance of paperwork for Work First caseworkers, which I will discuss in detail later.

Second, I observed as a participant and non-participant in a number of settings. These observations included things like shadowing caseworkers as if I were training, such as sitting in on interviews with welfare participants and sitting in the

cubicle area observing phone and face-to-face interaction between caseworkers and welfare participants. I also went on home visits to participants' homes, attended the job-readiness class, as well as the regional economic development summit and the quarterly regional workforce and economic development meetings. Additionally, I attended "Success Staffing" meetings, in which DSS workers and their community partners (nonprofit and other government agencies who provide services) met with welfare participants who were in danger of hitting time limits.

Third, I conducted interviews with welfare service providers including caseworkers, line supervisors, the program manager, and area nonprofit workers and managers. I interviewed all thirteen caseworkers working in the Work First program in the county. Of these caseworkers, all were women, five were White and eight were African American. I estimate that six were in their thirties, while the remaining caseworkers were older, their ages ranged from forties up to a few supervisors who were in their sixties. Three of the caseworkers had received cash assistance through the Department of Social Services before becoming caseworkers. An additional caseworker had once received county-coordinated outplacement assistance when the local textile mill closed.

In addition to the caseworkers, I interviewed two employees responsible for interacting primarily with companies, and secondarily with participants, in the county. One of these employees was an African American woman in her thirties whom the DSS employed and paid on a full-time basis. A second liaison was a White woman, also in her thirties, who was employed by the county's Chamber of Commerce, as well as the Department of Social Services. In addition to spending more than a day each week meeting participants at the Employment Security Commission, these community liaisons were responsible for promoting the "Work Experience" program. I also formally interviewed three line supervisors as a group and had frequent informal follow-up discussions with them individually. Of these supervisors, two were White and one was African American.

Finally, I interviewed one high-ranking supervisor who oversees Work First programs in the county. This supervisor

is a White woman who had worked at the DSS for more than twenty years. She is one of the few workers in this division holding a four-year degree. All the supervisors worked with DSS since before the 1996 welfare reform. All interviews with individuals (in total 19 DSS employees) were semi-structured, using techniques meant to elicit rich stories (Weiss, 1994). Interviews lasted between thirty minutes to over two hours, averaging just over an hour. I recorded all interviews, which were transcribed immediately. After initially open-coding the data, I used analytic memos to explore themes in the data. I then used focused-coding and subsequent analytic memos to analyze themes further. In this paper, I report these themes concerning how agency workers use paperwork to feel effective in a work environment that is largely structured by achieving statistical measures of success. Second, I explore how workers overcome focus on the paperwork as a source of competence and as a way to show others they are doing their jobs correctly.

### Challenges in Getting People to 'Work First'

Supervisors argued that the requirement of having half their program participants engaged in work-related activities is impossible to achieve. The state and federal governments have threatened that they will sanction the county if they do not reach their numbers. While this has yet to occur, caseworkers and supervisors have reason to fear sanctions, especially given the tight labor market in Smithgrove County. Despite this, caseworkers embraced the language of "self-sufficiency" and "Work First," and argued that it created a work ethic among otherwise unmotivated participants. Caseworkers and supervisors stated they need to help participants realize that any job is better than welfare. The caseworkers would often say, "It's called Work First, so you need to get to work first" and therefore skill development, education, and many other activities necessary to reach self-sufficiency take a backseat. This consistent message of "self-sufficiency" and going to "work first" to achieve self-sufficiency prompted me to ask caseworkers how they help participants find jobs. The caseworkers' first response was usually that participants must register with the state employment agency (ESC) through a program called "First Stop."



This program no longer received funding from the state, and several of the supervisors argued that workers at the ESC did not offer enough assistance to participants because of the lack of funding and staff. Kim, a supervisor, expresses her frustrations with the ESC, saying:

Their money got cut, and their staff, and they just don't want to do the extra stuff. So they have their goals to meet. They have their number crunches they have to have. [...] And we have had to put people in there to do it.

The quote illustrates a larger issue of program implementation and the relationships between government agencies. State law requires the ESC to provide a service to Work First participants, but they do not have the funding or staff resources to provide the service. The consequence is that welfare participants who are supposed to move from welfare to work do not get job referrals from the ESC staff. Despite this potential flaw in the policies and rules, caseworkers must still enforce these rules. In fact, caseworkers view themselves as helping participants by referring them to ESC, regardless of whether or not the ESC actually helps the participant. The act of referring to another organization is helping, in and of itself.

In addition to registering with First Stop at the ESC, participants must look for jobs (called "job search") on their own for thirty or more hours a week. Caseworkers monitored compliance with this requirement through checking participants' weekly timecards, but did little to help guide this process. Participants manually fill out the hours they participate in "work-related activities" each week using a paper timecard. Manual timecards, according to caseworkers, also create a work-like feeling of responsibility among the participants. Beyond monitoring timecards, caseworkers mandated participants attend a job-readiness class offered by a local nonprofit. The DSS provides almost all the funding for the organization offering the class. Participation in this class counts as a work-related activity, which helps the county meet expectations of the state. In the job-readiness class, participants learn to write resumes and learn how to interview for jobs. Unfortunately, this training may not help participants compete for low-wage jobs that often only accept applications, not resumes, and that

often do not require formal interviews.

When I asked her what she did to help clients find employment, Kathy, a caseworker, struggled with the question. After some follow-up, she responded, “well, every week Amanda [who works as a liaison between the Chamber of Commerce, the ESC and the DSS] sends me jobs listed through the ESC. Then I go through and look for ones that match my clients.” I asked how she contacted the participants to tell them about the job openings. Kathy replied that she sends them letters in the mail. Caseworkers send all their letters on their designated paperwork day of the week, so it could be days or more than a week before a participant learns of a job opening listed with the state employment agency. In a high unemployment labor market, like in Smithgrove County, job openings are filled quickly.

When I asked Kathy if caseworkers ever contacted participants by telephone to tell them about job openings, she again looked puzzled and replied that she does not call the participants about jobs. It is important to note that she, and all caseworkers, regularly calls participants about completing paperwork. Even one caseworker, Nancy, who takes extra effort to go through the job advertisements in the newspaper on weekends, sends letters with job information to participants on her paperwork day. As a rarity, she does call participants, but only about job fairs. She has never called them about specific job openings.

Once, on a participant home visit, I observed a caseworker give extra effort to help a participant find employment. The participant had a criminal record and the nature of the charge made it difficult for her to find employment. The caseworker and the participant talked about forms of bonding insurance she may be eligible for and then discussed having the liaison to the Chamber of Commerce assist this participant in finding a job. This conversation was unusual, since this was the only time I witnessed a caseworker and participant interact about something other than updating paperwork or complying with a rule. While caseworkers and managers constantly mentioned the “mutual responsibility” of both participants and the DSS and that “it takes a village,” the responsibility of finding a job rested almost solely with the participant and then the caseworker spent her time doing paperwork—documenting the participant’s efforts.

### “Document, Document, Document”

Caseworkers estimated they spent fifty to sixty percent of their time doing paperwork. Based on my observations, it would seem these estimates were conservative. Paperwork included sending letters like the ones mentioned above, but caseworkers also documented conversations, as well as how they spent their time. In this county, caseworkers blocked out one day a week to send letters and catch up on paperwork. Additionally, caseworkers also spent one day every two weeks doing “intake,” which means greeting participants and doing the initial eligibility screening interview with someone who usually will become someone else’s client. Caseworkers spent the remaining forty percent, or sixteen hours, of the week working with existing participants in their caseload, either face-to-face or, more commonly, on the telephone. Caseworkers in Smithgrove County carried a caseload of approximately forty to fifty families. If they were to spend sixteen hours equally across forty families, then each family gets only twenty-four minutes per week of the caseworker’s time. What little time caseworkers spent face-to-face or on the telephone was to check that the participant was completing paperwork or following rules, not working with them to find jobs.

In the “interview” process (when the caseworker discussed the application with the potential participant), caseworkers collected information about prior work history and education. The caseworkers then entered this data into the computer. Caseworkers did not ask participants about their job aspirations, or even their skills, in the interviews I observed. Caseworkers never talked with participants about improving skills or receiving training, despite the relevance to participant self-sufficiency. Also none of the interviews that I observed were completed, since the potential participant did not have all the information necessary to complete the paperwork. Caseworkers do not start processing the application until all the paperwork is completed, which includes the participants providing documentation to prove income, school enrollment, and immunization history, among other things. Having all the paperwork takes precedence over getting the participant started on searching for a job or getting needed assistance.

Social services work is well-known for high stress, turnover, and conflict with clients. I was quite surprised that when I asked caseworkers what their main source of frustration was, many caseworkers said it was with completing their paperwork. One caseworker, Nancy, expressed this frustration, saying it would be much easier on caseworkers if participants would just take benefit diversion checks and not go onto the welfare caseload. She then followed this saying, "God forbid if you get sick and you have to be out of work, because your stuff gets behind [...] God forbid that we get pulled for something else or called to a meeting. That gets you behind." This frustration in completing paperwork is not surprising, given paperwork is how caseworkers spend the majority of their time and since, for the caseworkers, completing their paperwork is their main source of success in their jobs.

Caseworkers would often say "document, document, document" with a smile. This word had become a mantra for both the supervisors and caseworkers. After hearing this phrase often in my fieldwork, I asked Julie, a caseworker, about it. She responded "yes, it is like a slogan, 'document, document, document'." I asked her when she first learned the slogan and she replied, "First day at work. Document, document, document. Document, document, document. Like [Kim, a supervisor], she always has to review everything that I do and she says 'Did you document? Did you document?'" Julie's repeating of the phrase is reflective of the work environment and socialization. Caseworkers and managers constantly say this phrase, reminding one another of the importance of documenting everything. Given the repetition of the document mantra and the emphasis on paperwork, I wanted to know why caseworkers thought documenting and completing paperwork were important.

### Documenting Accountability and Fairness

Beyond the constant reminders to document, caseworkers argued that documenting everything is important for two reasons. First and foremost, caseworkers were clear that documenting everything provided proof that they had performed their jobs as expected in the event of a hearing or an audit.

Second, and related to this, caseworkers argued that documenting and following rules ensured that they had treated clients fairly. Importantly, both reasons were given by all the caseworkers and they often discussed fairness to clients and covering themselves in overlapping and somewhat confusing ways.

When I asked Alice, a caseworker, about why she thought documenting was important she responded, "Well, it's to, you know, C.Y.A.—cover your ass." Other caseworkers responded similarly, saying it was necessary to document everything in case the client complained and asked for a hearing. Alice talked further about this, saying documenting creates a "paper trail" and went on to say, "It helps you keep your job. I'm helping myself and I'm helping the county and I'm helping my co-workers." Notice Alice does not mention paperwork helps clients, but suggests instead that it is important for covering yourself, keeping your job, and helping the county. Judy elaborated on this idea, saying:

So it's like a record to show that we did this. We didn't skip this. We went through with this. And sometimes it's a running—it's a running—we have to do a lot of detection, so it lets them know what we are doing. Each time we pick up something or each time we do something, it lets them know that we did all the proper procedures, we explained everything and just chalk it up to that.

Here Judy discussed the importance of keeping a record of what has been done, especially in terms of "detection," which means surveying clients to look for fraudulent behavior. She further elaborates on the extent to which they have to document, saying every time they "pick up" or "do something" they have to document to show they followed "proper procedures."

The caseworkers suggested it was important to use the paperwork to show that they were doing their jobs correctly, which they argue means they treated a client fairly and followed procedure. When I asked Ann, a caseworker, about the manual and rules, she spoke positively about having a manual, saying "Well, anything that we need to know, we can pull that manual up and most of the time it's there. And so we

don't have to wonder about 'should I do it this way or should I do it that way?'" Ann suggests having rules and guidelines prevents the worker from having to worry about how something should be done. Also, implicit in this statement is that caseworkers wanted to avoid making mistakes and they also wanted to be fair.

Nearly all of the caseworkers and supervisors in Smithgrove County placed a great deal of emphasis on doing a good job and doing it right. Caseworkers did not want to make mistakes in general, and they certainly did not want to make a mistake that might harm a client. Many caseworkers also told me that making a mistake can cost the county money, and they very much wanted to avoid that. In many ways, the caseworkers suggest being required to document everything and having procedures standardized and routinized helps them treat clients fairly. Documenting everything holds caseworkers accountable to treat clients by the rules.

As mentioned above, in Smithgrove County, caseworkers allocated certain days to do certain tasks. For instance, on a day a caseworker is asked to conduct intake and handle face-to-face interactions with clients, she will see both her clients and clients in other caseworkers' caseloads. This division of labor is supposed to make the caseworkers more efficient through having them focus and group similar tasks. Given this labor process, caseworkers need to be able to deal with another caseworker's client without interrupting the other caseworker. Nancy explained the importance of documenting, given this labor process:

So that's why it's important. If you're not going to be here, or if your worker's not going to be here a certain day, that you document whatever it is you need for the client to do or whatever in case the client comes in when you're not here.

Alice, another caseworker, also talked about the importance of documenting, given the division of labor:

We have everything straight and then also to have your co-workers to read behind you because we all the time have to be seeing each other's clients [...] you have to cover and it was tough, but we managed [...] Because we are working with everyone.

While caseworkers complained about the amount of duplicate paperwork and the fact that the computers crashed constantly, overall, the paperwork, many argued, helped them in their jobs. Some caseworkers suggested having the rules and documenting everything holds caseworkers accountable to treat all clients the same, which again, they argued, is the same as treating them fairly. In this sense, standardization means fairness, which means, to them, a lack of discrimination. Historically there has been some concern over caseworkers using discretion to illegally discriminate against clients (for detailed analyses of this history see Gordon, 1990). The caseworkers seem aware of this criticism and suggest they must consistently document their actions on forms and in the computer databases. Stephanie discusses this, saying:

You know you have your booklet that you have to do your standard questions, you know[...] When you first start you feel overwhelmed with the paperwork, but to keep it where more people don't fall through the cracks and not get services they need. Well there's that, I guess, to stop a type of client from getting more than what they need. We've got to have every piece of paper that we do.

This quote from Stephanie illustrates some of the complex feelings about paperwork. First, she discussed the standardization and suggested caseworkers must always ask the standard questions. Of course, they must then document the answers. Second, she acknowledged the paperwork is overwhelming to a new person, but suggests learning the paperwork is seen as a big accomplishment. Finally, Stephanie mentioned that paperwork was a means of surveillance to ensure a client received the appropriate amount of services. Stephanie's comment also is consistent with the first reason caseworkers give for doing paperwork, which is a way for caseworkers to cover themselves in the event of an audit or hearing. Stephanie continued discussing the importance of paperwork in a way that further shows this overlap in reasoning:

Umm, it's a point of information, but having that paperwork in the books, in the records and a case terminates and then she comes back in the next month

or 2 or 3 months later, you can kind of, you can kind of glance over the paperwork that she did before, before you go get her and when she says I've never lived outside the state of North Carolina, well when you were here 2 months ago and stated that you had lived in West Virginia and Kentucky, you know. And it kind of helps us to follow the story, umm, and I guess it also has the statement about what they want us to do.

The paper trail here helped Stephanie catch this client's dishonesty. While the bulk of her statement was about catching this client, she later mentions the paperwork helped caseworkers follow the client's story in a way that helped them know how they could help the client.

## Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper, I have contributed to the research on welfare policy implementation by examining what is often taken for granted—paperwork. My findings illustrate that caseworkers used paperwork in three main ways: paperwork was a way to feel effective or successful in their jobs; paperwork was a way to show you followed rules and “covered your ass;” and paperwork was, according to caseworkers, a way to ensure the fair treatment of clients. More broadly, the caseworkers' focus on paperwork highlights their buy-in and compliance with current welfare ideology (Handler & Hasenfeld 2007) and the so-called “common sense” of welfare (Ridzi 2004, 2009).

First, completing paperwork was a way for caseworkers to achieve standard measures of effectiveness and to feel successful in their jobs. A great deal of literature has questioned the effectiveness of current welfare-to-work programs in the United States (e.g., see the 2008 special issue of the *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* about the “success” of welfare; Corcoran et al., 2000; Hennessy, 2005; Lichter & Jayakody, 2002; O'Connor, 2000). There are no clear mechanisms currently in place in the Smithgrove County Work First program that would allow caseworkers to effectively help participants. Even if there were mechanisms, the lack of participant education and skills and the poor local labor market are barriers potentially too large to overcome. Given this, caseworkers turn to the concrete tasks on which supervisors evaluate them: finishing their



paperwork on time. While paperwork is frustrating, it is something they can do effectively.

Additionally, caseworkers and managers argued the paperwork was important to show you were doing your job correctly (cover yourself) and it is important because it holds caseworkers accountable to treating program participants fairly. Lipsky (1980), and later Watkins-Hayes (2009), both describe the conflicting roles of street-level bureaucrats. On the one hand, these workers are expected to help clients, but on the other, they are expected to police the behavior of those they serve. Being somewhat wedged between serving their bureaucracies and clients creates a dilemma, one that is often solved by focusing on rule-mindedness. In many ways, caseworkers avoid this dilemma through focusing the majority of their time on completing paperwork.

Again, given the lack of mechanisms for helping program participants, caseworkers focus on completing paperwork, arguing that it helps them be fair. No one, however, suggested the paperwork helps program participants find work or helps them move from welfare to work. The argument that paperwork ensured fairness also seemed a response to arguments of bias or discrimination by caseworkers (see Gordon's 1990 historical work on caseworker bias), something future work should consider more. While recent work has examined case closure and race (Monnat, 2010; Monnat & Bunyan, 2008; Schram, 2005), it is possible some caseworkers believe they are resisting bias, which may or may not be the case. In short, the caseworkers in Smithgrove County wanted to treat people fairly and to them, treating everyone the same, in terms of paperwork, meant being fair.

Finally, the caseworkers' focus on paperwork shows their buy-in to welfare ideology (Handler & Hasenfeld 2007) or to the "common sense" of welfare (Ridzi 2004, 2009). The majority of the paperwork is meant to show the program participant is either complying with parenting guidelines (i.e., vaccinations, school attendance) or work-related participation requirements (i.e., job search and working somewhere under the Work Experience program). The main reason program participants are sanctioned in Smithgrove County is for failure to complete paperwork or document good cause for missing a work or welfare office related appointment. Caseworkers

also use paperwork to prove they are following the rules of a punitive welfare ideology (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007; Ridzi 2004, 2009) that encourages caseworkers to constantly surveil program participants in the event they are engaged in fraudulent activities. None of the documentation actually helps program participants find work.

Paperwork in welfare bureaucracies might never go away and, to some degree, a paper trail is helpful to the program participant in the event that a caseworker does make an error and the participant needs to file a grievance. However, Ridzi (2009) argues that welfare providers could use the massive amounts of paperwork to provide a service to clients instead of using it only for surveillance. Researchers and administrators could track what works and does not work to better inform policy change. This would require minimal structural change to our current system and could uncover best practices or mechanisms for helping clients find good jobs. Creating mechanisms for helping clients find good jobs would not only enhance the well-being of clients, it would likely greatly improve the well-being and job satisfaction of caseworkers.

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