1 Introduction

Introduction: Getting the “Right” Worker to Help

When I teach undergraduate students on issues of poverty and homelessness, they often enter the class with a framework of ideas centered on how to motivate people who experience these hardships. After all, people experiencing homelessness are in every city around the world, so most people willing to learn about the issue have already seen, or even interacted with, someone experiencing homelessness or poverty. Like anything else, these experiences act as references and inform many assumptions on the matter. People might assume that entry into the service system is easy and point to agencies that offer support. However, perhaps most paramount is considering how broader social structures contribute to such issues, along with the inherent shortcomings and roadblocks that prevent access into the housing system. In short, the housing system can be so convoluted with bureaucracy that some researchers have described it as “particularly impenetrable paperwork” (Browne, Mackie, and England 2021: 1). For this reason, it is not a surprise that trying to navigate access into housing services can seem like an impossible process—that is, without the right help.

In my own work, I focus on how people interact with social service workers, how the service system is structured, and how workers implement service access with their clients who seek aid. My goal is to reframe how people approach the issue of homelessness, moving beyond traditional beliefs to view the situation from the perspective of social service workers, and to supplement this understanding with academic research.

To make things relatable, I typically follow each lesson in my classes by posing some version of the following question to my students: “Given what we have learned today, if you experienced homelessness tomorrow, what would you do?” I ask this so that readers consider what it must be like to go through the process themselves. With this approach in mind, I start by describing the theme of this book with an analogy on a similar issue that affected nearly everyone: the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Pandemic Analogy

Soon after COVID-19 began to plague the world in 2019, it became the most talked-about issue. In the United States, the health crisis highlighted a need
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to emphasize the streamlined implementation of service aid. When vaccines became available, everyday conversations became consumed with confusion about who qualified for the vaccine and how to get it. People questioned official health policy, but also sought answers regarding the technicalities of getting access to the vaccine. It soon became clear that many people who qualified for the vaccine had difficulties accessing services. For example, people who were eligible for the vaccine early on faced challenges with signing up online and accessing transportation to vaccine sites. After these problems became apparent, the issue of policy implementation became the forefront of vaccine distribution. Many people seeking vaccination could not access it on their own, so they needed to rely on others, which further complicated things. Some states offered vaccines, and even cash, to anyone who helped transport those who were elderly and high-risk to vaccine sites (Armus 2021). It was clear that many groups of people who were permitted by official policy to receive the vaccine needed to rely on some form of liaison in the implementation of the vaccine distribution, especially early on. The emphasis turned to the actions of front-line workers almost immediately.

In the first phases of vaccine rollouts, the U.S. government prioritized vaccination of people of older ages. But rules about who could receive the vaccine were vague in other ways, which granted some leeway for many people who felt desperate to be vaccinated. After all, the official sentiment was that getting vaccinated would save lives, and possibly even your own. The goal of the official policy was to get everyone vaccinated, eventually. However, those who sought vaccination experienced an arduous process where websites meant to schedule vaccination appointments were overwhelmed and left many people to spend hours refreshing their browsers in anticipation of an open slot for an appointment (Fowler 2021). Those seeking vaccination soon also became aware that many healthcare workers distributing the vaccine were not as stringent with formal policy as anticipated, which prompted some without medical vulnerabilities to wonder if they could also “sneak through” to be vaccinated (Mazzei 2021). For this reason, people thought they could technically qualify and be vaccinated, despite the perceived rigidity of official policy. In fact, it all depended on which healthcare workers people interacted with.

Additionally, official policy shifted over time, and people who sought vaccination had to keep abreast of such changes. The transition from Trump’s presidency to Biden’s in January 2021 brought stark and visible changes to official policy regarding the pandemic. The federal government began valuing recommendations by the Center for Disease Control and echoing the sentiments of the World Health Organization, implementing federal mandates instead of relying on state-level officials to make their own rules (Chappell 2021; White House 2021). Wearing masks became mandated in certain social spaces, such as federal buildings and airports. Still, how people interpreted the implementation of formal rules varied depending on the environment. From restaurants to schools, things were being done differently (CDC 2021; Education 2021; Thomas and Findell 2021). Depending on the social space
and context, workers who were in authority positions could decide the level of rigidity (or lack thereof) for enforcing the rules (McAuliff et al. 2021; Pantaleo 2021). Some store owners had strict protocol in place for every patron to follow, while others had minimal, if any at all.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the topic of effective implementation of policy to the forefront of everyday dialogue. A few themes became apparent in the process of discerning how to operationalize policy, one of them being that those who help others in the implementation process are immensely valuable in alleviating challenges. Adhering to strict stipulations of rules can be confusing, and many people do not have the means to comply with official policies, even if they are part of the very group that the policy intends to help. Another theme is that despite official rules that prioritize certain populations, many others could also receive service depending on the discretion of health workers or those in charge. For example, some health workers decided to dispense COVID-19 vaccinations indiscriminately when snowy weather stopped them in a traffic jam (Salcedo 2021). They realized they would not make it to their destination in time before their Moderna vaccines expired, so, as one worker put it, “I decided to start going door-to-door, car-to-car, offering” vaccines to anyone who wanted to receive them (Salcedo 2021: 1). Evidently, although federal policies appear stringent in order to avoid any “mooching off” of the system in place, front-line workers can prioritize their own set of ethics when distributing the service at hand. They consider the greater good by focusing on the larger picture as opposed to being punitive and sticking to the “letter of the law.”

Finally, formal policy can actually limit services. Those who are in roles to help the recipients of services can still do so, despite the limitations of formal policy and the changes it goes through over time. In short, those who helped people receive vaccination with a heavily bureaucratized system in place have been critical in achieving vital public health goals. Many times, they do so lacking a general strategy for implementation. No matter what side of the political aisle that people are on, considering how people interacted beyond official policy was at the forefront of the issue and affected everyone’s daily lives.

Broader Significance

Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic is not the only example of a set of bureaucratic policies that frustrate their intended recipients in their implementation. Many social policies aim to provide services, but also have regulations in place to manage access to aid in an orderly way. Hospitals and healthcare systems, in general, are heavily bureaucratic with policies that many would argue are severe and actually prevent access for people who desperately need services (Carroll 2020). Additionally, these problems are not limited to the public sector. Applying for loans in banks and navigating the financial stipulations of buying a home can be an arduous regulatory process. Even for someone who has the money to afford these services and officially qualifies, proving so can be
a maddening part of the process (Fontinelle and Cetera 2021; Saunders 2018). Anyone who has ever called customer service centers of large corporations, such as Comcast, Time Warner (now WarnerMedia), or Bank of America, also knows they offer little actual customer support (Hinchcliff and McCarthy 2010). Calls can result in being transferred from one department to another or becoming trapped in an endless loop within the automated phone system. Customers or clients often feel like it was all a big waste of time, powerless to accomplish even the simplest tasks with the company.

However, navigating such a complicated web of services with the right help from a knowledgeable worker can change the outcome dramatically. Helpful workers can change a frustrating situation of potential “lost business,” where a patron or client gives up and walks out altogether, into a beneficial experience where the service implementation unfolds either as the company intends or even better than expected for the client or patron. This detail can have the same effect in the realm of social services.

In each of the preceding examples, the recipients of services rely on experienced workers who understand how to go beyond the basic standards of their job in providing their intended services. This is because the details of implementation are important. Official policies often shift over time, yet the enduring efforts of helpful workers are what make such policies effective. In good times and bad, these are the workers who go the proverbial “extra mile” for the recipients of the service by saying, “let’s make this work.” A knowledgeable worker who is willing to help their client navigate a bureaucratic system, and even advocate for their needs, can seem like the only thing making the service work when the system itself seems to be working against clients.

We can see examples of this everywhere. In the movie *Just Mercy* (Cretton 2019), a lawyer decides to help someone navigate the treacherous bureaucracy of the criminal justice system because he believes that the defendant was treated poorly by the system. Doctors during the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s fought for the rights of their patients (Bayer and Oppenheimer 2002). In 2020, Georgia’s policies on voting began changing and have been met with aggressive resistance, as a result (Abrams et al. 2020; Impelli 2021). There are many different victims of the contemporary paradigm in which we find ourselves, but they are typically treated as an anomaly if they successfully persevere. For example, the movie *Pursuit of Happiness*, starring the actor Will Smith, is about one man’s experience of homelessness and his journey to eventually earn housing through his own perseverance. However, in this book, I show that successful transitions into housing by people experiencing homelessness happen much more often than readers might think. It is time we notice how successful social service workers are, despite traditionally having limited resources at their disposal.

Cornel West once described the regularity with which people of color overcome hardships by saying:

> From my perspective, it’s just part of the normal order of things. … So that it’s not some sort of aberration, or anomaly to wrestle with catastrophe. …
Catastrophe with which we must come to terms if in fact our societies are to survive and endure.

(Mendieta 2017: 145)

In a similar way, I question why we collectively favor the notion that overcoming homelessness is an anomaly when it is, in fact, happening every day. Many typically suppose that once someone experiences homelessness, then there is (supposedly) no return to normal society unless the person experiencing homelessness undergoes some sort of profound change in their personality. In reality, social service workers help many people experiencing homelessness access indoor living conditions. It is time to consider the workers who advocate on their clients’ behalf throughout their daily routines to successfully get their clients into housing. How do we understand these workers and what they do? This book offers a perspective on how social service workers meet the needs of their homeless clients through what I call “assertive advocacy,” despite imperfect and ever-changing housing policies. Here, I provide a case study in policy implementation and the adaptation of social service workers who work with their clients who experience homelessness. Additionally, the strategies offered here go beyond the issues of homelessness and can be applied to other social issues.

Focusing on Social Service Workers

Over the last century, a substantial body of ethnographic research focusing on the topic of homelessness has primarily studied the lived experiences of people experiencing homelessness. Examples of this include such well-known ethnographies as Nels Anderson’s *The Hobo* (1923), Samuel Wallace’s *Skid Row as a Way of Life* (1965), David Snow and Leon Anderson’s *Down on Their Luck* (1993), and Philippe Bourgois and Jeffrey Schonberg’s *Righteous Dopefiend* (2009), to mention but a few key studies. While notable ethnographic studies devoted to examining the experiences of people without a home continue to be pursued, my previous experiences as a homeless service provider offered a different direction for potential research—the activities of homeless social service workers. The decision to orient my research toward social service workers who work with people experiencing homelessness is consistent with work conducted by a handful of other ethnographic researchers, including Prashan Ranasinghe, who observed:

Despite emanating from a rich ethnographic tradition and offering sophisticated, detailed, and insightful analyses … most inquiries [focused on homelessness] are limited because they are largely one-sided. What they fail to explore and reveal is … the perspective of the personnel who work in these sites, that is, the service providers.

(2017: 5)
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Like Ranasinghe, I observed a disconnect between what is typically referenced in literature on homelessness regarding existing policy and the common practices that unfold on the ground when working with people who experience homelessness. I also witnessed inconsistencies between official policy and how workers informally carried out the demands of their employment.

In his seminal book, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service*, Michael Lipsky (1980) focused on the various strategies used by ground-level public service workers, or “street-level bureaucrats,” as they enact the complicated and often arduous tasks required of them in their jobs. Lipsky’s work provides an excellent theoretical framework for my research. The work of street-level bureaucrats entails considerable discretionary power because they often work in virtually unsupervised “front-line” settings, and social policies are often ambiguous or subject to different interpretations.

Lipsky emphasizes that issues of contested political nature are often especially vague because of continued disagreement among politicians and policy drafters. Complete structural control based on inviolable rules and criteria would render the worker a robotic cog in the bureaucratic wheel. However, when strategic discretionary power is granted to these workers, they can better respond to the individual circumstances of their clientele. Put simply, Lipsky’s approach to street-level bureaucracy seeks to answer the question, “How do ground-level social service workers adapt to imperfect social policies?” (Brodkin 2012).

I argue that this ability grants them the freedom to do their job successfully. Such discretion comes in the form of authorized and unauthorized choices during their workday, making street-level bureaucrats “virtual policy creators” on a case-by-case basis with the public that they serve (Lipsky 1980: 13). Rather than treat policy as a fixed entity and compliance as the subordinate act of a ground-level worker, Lipsky views the permitted and unpermitted daily decisions of street-level bureaucrats as part of the policymaking process in street-level bureaucracies.

Drawing on Lipsky, Evelyn Brodkin has elaborated on the separation between policy and implementation by street-level bureaucrats. In a series of articles on street-level social services, Brodkin (2008; 2012; 2017) has championed street-level ethnography focused on social service agencies. Governmental policy often blames victims who seek services and challenges the competency of ground-level workers who are meant to help them navigate the system. To dispute this, Brodkin’s scholarship addresses social service workers as essential street-level bureaucrats who employ a deeper recognition and appreciation for the needs of their individual clients in their efforts, which often align with formal policy aims.

Street-level bureaucrats are the nexus through which social service work is provided. Building on the scholarship of Lipsky and Brodkin, the goal of this book is to create an extensive awareness of the challenges faced by social service workers who work with people experiencing homelessness and the creative ways in which they advocate for their clients.
“Red-Tape Warriors”

Social service workers have long been evaluated based on how well they adhere to a “compliance” model, or the official standards that govern their job, which often involves limiting their discretion (Brodkin 1986). Following the formal process is thought to be straightforward for people who qualify for services. After all, if social service agencies are found to be violating compliance standards, legal action can be taken and their funding can suffer. However, just as with vaccine distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic, official standards can be convoluted with restrictions that overwhelm people seeking services. When social service workers do not stick to the formal rules, administrators and policymakers assume that workers are not doing their jobs adequately, are not helping as many people as they should, or may be denying help to people who seek services. For example, punitive oversite was necessary among welfare workers in the Southern United States during the era of Jim Crow to ensure that Black populations in need of service aid were allowed access to it (Omi and Winant 2014). This example emphasizes the separation between official policy and implementation. It emphasizes the need to constrain the discretion of workers who withhold available services. However, in this study, quite the opposite was happening because the workers contributed more time and effort than was asked of them to help people who were living on the streets.

In writing this book, I seek to address gaps in the literature on homelessness and housing policy by focusing on how social service workers get their homeless clients into housing successfully and incorporate this aspect of their job into their daily routine. Veteran workers exhibited what I call “assertive advocacy” for their clients by going beyond the formal standards of their job in order to improve the outcomes of service aid, usually doing so with very limited resources. Assertive advocacy is typically used by workers who have years of experience in social services, while newer workers who have yet to learn such strategies rely closely on official policies and can end up even denying clients help. While services often focus on the importance of complying with official policies, assertive advocates identify shortcomings in agency policies and procedures. They may develop shortcuts and workarounds to provide services that better serve clients who they see as worthy of their agency’s services. In the process, they may find themselves doing more work than is mandated by the standards of their job.

Employees of social service organizations are accountable to the bureaucracies in which they are employed (i.e., agency policy, funding policy, compliance measures) while also being immersed in daily, face-to-face interaction with members of the public who may desire service aid. Successful implementation of agency services requires social service workers to bridge the gap between bureaucratically managed resources and the often complex and troubled lives of the clients. To invoke a term that has emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, street-level social service employees are “essential workers.” The red-tape warriors presented in this book are examples of unsung heroes in the
fight against homelessness. They represent one of the many groups of assertive advocates found in varying degrees throughout the U.S. housing, health, and education sectors. As such, this case study of homelessness and social service workers bears relevance to the successful implementation of public services across the country.

This Study

I consider the perspective of ground-level social service workers who intimately work with people experiencing homelessness on a daily basis in a city in the Mountain West of the United States, a place that caught national attention for its novel adoption of the “Housing First” philosophy. In this study, I describe various steps in social service workers’ negotiation of the housing process with their homeless clients, other public service workers, and the landlords who often take homeless clients in as tenants. Most of all, I emphasize the overlooked successes of social service workers who work with people experiencing homelessness.

Early in my fieldwork, for example, I overheard one worker, Shelly, saying to another worker, Veronica, that she had placed four individuals who had been experiencing homelessness into housing that same day. I asked her to elaborate.

Me: Is that many successes normal in one day? And, how much of your work involves seeking verification?
Shelly: [Laughing] A lot! If they have all their documentation, like him [pointing to the door indicating her recent client], then I can get them housed fast, usually within the same day. That’s when I get four in a day. But when they need to verify a [replacement] Social Security card or a birth certificate then it can take much longer.

Me: So, it sounds like verifying documents is a big part of your day.
Shelly: Yes. But I can call over to get a letter from the state to verify the birth certificate, which is valid for two weeks in place of the actual birth certificate.

Me: Oh, so you can verify documents in a more roundabout way?
Shelly: Yes. That’s where we get creative. But it’s only for two weeks’ time, so we have to get everything else going fast. So, if the client goes missing, gets arrested and thrown in jail, or decides not to follow through then everything starts over.

Me: So, I guess explaining all that to the client is important.
Shelly: [Emphatically] Yes! If I explain to the client how things work here at Major Shelter Services (MSS), then send them over to another agency—they have their own set of rules and expectations, so it can be very confusing for them. I’ve had clients get confused over what agency they are even at when I take them places. They are like, “I thought this was MSS,” and I’m like, “No, this is the clinic, and that last place was an
emergency room.” [Laughing] Then, teaching them what they need to do to get through another system at another agency can be completely overwhelming because they barely understand our system and rules, here. If I have someone over in another agency that needs documentation, then they will fail because my clients are unfamiliar with their rules and system. So, I generally have to stop what I’m doing and run the errands myself and drive with them.

The official process was difficult to understand at first, with rules that kept evolving, so I could not help but sympathize with anyone who had recently been evicted or needed to understand the minutiae of official housing policy in their attempts to secure service aid. When I started my fieldwork, I aimed to learn the structural policies and technicalities of the bureaucratic system before I could understand the advice that workers were passing to their clients, and I urge readers to use the same strategy. Luckily, I already had six years of experience as a social service worker in a few other cities. Having a loose grasp of the housing process from the previous cities I lived in provided me with a general foundation to work with as I listened to my respondents describe the housing system in this study.

Without my years of background as a social service worker, I would have been completely lost in the bureaucracy as a researcher and may have even missed important details about the situations I was observing. I also sympathize with anyone who takes interest in the topic of homeless services only to be overwhelmed by the intricate nature of the service system. Its policies dictate who is allowed to receive such services, who is not, and provide little reasoning as to why. My intention here is to describe to readers how social service workers effectively and strategically help their homeless clients into housing. In doing so, I also call attention to various roadblocks that plague many social services—and the ways in which red-tape warriors find ways around them. In the location where this study took place, various forms of subsidized housing had a waiting list of over seven years, which was typical across the United States (Affordable Housing Online 2017; Sieg and Yoon 2016). However, the process could be expedited if clients fit other vulnerable subcategories of homelessness via locally organized “fast-track” meetings, which are described in a later chapter. The workers saw a need to expedite things, so they collectively organized a means to accomplish a solution given the bureaucratic constraints they faced. They took additional time from their busy workday to meet weekly to accomplish this.

**Creative Discretionary Power**

This book features the struggle that workers in social services experience to creatively circumvent existing policy barriers embedded in the housing system. In the previous example, Shelly and Veronica worked their clients through
official avenues while also using dynamic discretionary means to get the job done. They also needed to finesse a clear explanation of the bureaucratic process to their homeless clients in a way that did not overwhelm them to the point of giving up the program altogether, which happened often. Other workers who have less experience might not bother taking time to accomplish any of this, instead judging their clients more punitively or sticking to the basic rules and procedures of compliance. Just like health workers helping people get vaccinated during the first years of COVID-19 (or any worker providing access through a bureaucratic service), the workers in this study provided essential aid to people so they could find stable housing and move forward with their lives. Such services have been shown to be vital in improving broader issues of public health among homeless populations given that peoples’ health issues intensify while living on the street (Martens 2001; Snow and Goldberg 2017).

As my ethnographic research developed, I grew interested in all the processes, paperwork, and verifications that were essential parts of social service workers’ jobs. The system through which workers referred their clients warranted information that was excessive and not always readily available. Confronting all this, Shelly bluntly said, “There are plenty of times when we must get creative in order to get clients the help they actually need.” I wanted to dive deeper into the bureaucratic dynamics to witness this creative process myself.

Early in my research, I realized that many lay people and even some researchers are interested in quantifying which groups of people experiencing homelessness should be prioritized, or put their energy into weeding out those who supposedly “mooch off the system” (both are among quandaries I recognize in later chapters). Homeless populations are more diverse than people often think and “majority” subcategories do not truly exist, according to meta-analyses on the subject (Lee et al. 2010; Shlay and Rossi 1992; Susser et al. 1990). Those studies that do find higher representation among subpopulations, such as severe mental illness or chronic addiction, typically sample solely from controlled environments where respondents must fit the category before entering the facility (i.e., shelters and housing funded via Shelter Plus Care and the Continuum of Care) (Smith and Castañeda 2020).

However, something became more important to me. How do social service workers help their clients navigate an exclusionary and complex housing system that changes over time? Furthermore, performing their job successfully meant expecting those who experience hardships and recent homelessness to understand and accept taking part in following a very bureaucratically arcane housing system. A case in point was when one veteran worker, Anna, put it simply, “I do this stuff all day. I get trained and get paid to do all this—[emphatically] and it confuses me! How can they expect someone who is recently homeless to go through this system on their own!” Another worker, Brock, joked, “Have you ever actually seen the way the rule is written? It reads like a Russian novel.”

It does not take long for new social service workers to notice that their role, according to the official standards of their employment, has many inherent contradictions. Many of my respondents felt that the excessive rigmarole
of “weeding out” those who supposedly “mooch off the system” prevented access to the very demographics that official policy prioritized. Current social policy can neglect and even contradict a large portion of research on homelessness. Oftentimes, workers felt that formal success under the demands of their job seemed impossible, yet found ways to overcome the barriers they encountered. I learned that communication was crucial in housing people experiencing homelessness—coordination with homeless clients, workers at other agencies, and ultimately landlords—if it all went successfully. I later expand upon how the necessary information was conveyed throughout the formal process and also the informal communication workarounds, on the back end, when there were obstacles.

Additionally, workers often bypass procedural obstacles in spite of their homeless clients’ desires. This means that after social service workers accomplish all the work, the homeless client can simply refuse the service. This may seem counterintuitive, but people might not readily accept the rules of the system that dictates the ways in which people are to be housed. Returning to the pandemic analogy, just consider how many people optioned out of being vaccinated. People experiencing poverty and homelessness can (and often do) forgo the process and avoid services for various reasons (Canvin et al. 2007; Donley and Wright 2012; Kryda et al. 2009), even when they desperately want housing. Many want to evade additional stigmatizing labels that can be necessary within the system to qualify for housing. Ariel, a respondent in Vincent-Callo’s (2000) research, was labeled by more punitive social service workers as “noncompliant” for refusing to be diagnosed with a severe mental illness in exchange for service eligibility. Ariel said, “It’s like they’re saying, ‘We can’t change the economy, so we have to change you” (p340).

Based on the experiences of the red-tape warriors in this book, I explore how policies meant to help the poor often constrain workers by inhibiting who can be helped and how. Put simply, they must adhere to official rules, funding stipulations, and their agency’s policy on matters, which can (ironically) often complicate the tasks workers are expected to carry out. This can also make their job more difficult, costly, and even limit the availability of services. For this reason, helping their clients beyond the official requirements of their job through assertive advocacy is necessary to manage the demands of their job successfully. The commonality of burnout (Lloyd, King, and Chenoweth 2002) also makes this book useful as a tool to teach and orient aspiring social service workers to the many challenges, and the necessary determination involved, in social work. Additionally, federal funding in 2021 is increasing to aid homeless housing services. This study calls for increased research on issues of implementation under such funding mandates. After all, growth in housing funding does not necessarily mean access into housing will be granted to people in need of such funds. Many bureaucratic restrictions spotlighted in this book are expected to continue, despite such funding increases in 2021.

Housing people experiencing homelessness entails reckoning with some common misconceptions, such as that social service workers are somehow
“failing” at housing people who experience homelessness or that people experiencing homelessness are jumping at their first chance to be housed. The research presented in this book finds, among other things, that social service workers are quite effective at housing people who experience homelessness, despite their lack of resources. In the city where this research was conducted, they even did so in record numbers each year, constantly outperforming their prior records. One administrator who tracked the agency’s official records described this phenomenon by pointing to a consistent increase in the number of people experiencing recent homelessness (i.e., those who had recently been evicted or otherwise displaced), which was outpacing their success. He noted that public and political discourses often neglect many successes of social services due to the visibility of people recently evicted or displaced, which was even higher than those who were being placed into housing.

Much goes unnoticed by the broader public who have homes. Problems arise as people pursue housing access encounter various bureaucratic barriers, such as disagreements about client appropriateness for services, legitimacy of assessment tools, and service resistance by the clients themselves. Clients also need to fit the priorities of funding allocation to obtain housing. This book spotlights the innovative successes that social service workers endeavor in their efforts to house people experiencing homelessness, gain tenants for local landlords, and reduce the number of visibly homeless groups in an otherwise rising homeless population. This work focuses attention on the practices of social service workers rather than an official procedural line from which workers may often diverge. I argue that if policymakers were able to understand why ground-level workers make their decisions in routine and unexpected ways, then better social policies that integrate the discretionary component of how these workers successfully do their work might be enacted. Additionally, the concepts from this book can be used as tools to explore how front-line workers navigate any bureaucracy, such as the broader examples at the beginning of the book (i.e., healthcare workers, criminal justice, and customer services in private industry).

Book Layout

In Chapter 2, I first present the methods used in this study and introduce key informants, who I call “red-tape warriors.” I then explain the social and political context of the geographic location I refer to as “The Block” in which the study took place. I follow this with an overview of the social context of local political initiatives meant to relocate a local shelter as a means to deal with a perception of high crime in the area. I examine the city’s recent adoption of the “Housing First” philosophy and how it compares to the traditional tiered model of the “Continuum of Care.” The city’s adoption of the Housing First approach serves as a case study for national debates on dealing with homelessness and speaks to federal and local policy on the subject. I then focus on enduring problems of implementation among current approaches and point to
how workers in this region of the United States prioritize a humanist approach to providing aid.

I report my findings in the succeeding chapters. In Chapter 3, I lay out how essential it was for workers to establish and maintain trusting relationships with their clients, which often took a great deal of time. Gaining useful information about homeless clients was crucial to their acceptance into housing services. Sometimes, clients possessed documentation and fit established criteria for services. However, workers emphasized that being willing to build trusting relationships established a means to adapt to potential problems throughout what could be a long process in attaining housing.

In Chapter 4, I describe the official means of standardizing how to decide who gets priority for housing aid among homeless clients. Here, I explain workers’ efforts to adhere to the changing structural demands of policy. I start by overviewing how diverse and complex the homeless population is beyond those who actively seek services. I then outline how the complicated bureaucracy of services is structured in relation to the complex homeless population. As an example, clients can gain eligibility for support if they experience the federal government’s definitions of “chronic” and “literal” homelessness. Additionally, the Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT) is utilized by social services and urban centers in many cities across the United States and Canada to aid in determining service eligibility based on the official measurements of clients’ vulnerabilities. Regardless of how well some cases fit the official model of implementation, there are other cases in which street-level bureaucrats find it essential to creatively approach the SPDAT assessment tool in ways that they believe facilitate appropriate client designations and services.

I begin Chapter 5 by recounting the struggle social service workers experience with establishing professional legitimacy with other workers, including their peers at their own agency and other services, and dealing with the police. Building a knowledge of their clients served workers well when establishing credibility with their peers and other social service providers to streamline housing access for their clients. After getting to know their clients well enough for them to score well on the SPDAT and qualify for housing access, workers in the case study advocated for clients to be potentially “fast-tracked” at meetings with other social service workers. Although workers put effort into expediting their clients into housing, their advancements could often be interrupted by random police involvement via “sweeps.” I outline the effects of police sweeps on the housing process and how they disrupted the work of social service workers.

In Chapter 6, I describe a phenomenon I call “fitting stories.” As street-level bureaucrats, social service workers need to verify that their clients deserve services through an established vetting process, which means that workers use their discretionary power to determine whether their clients meet the formal criteria for support provided by the social service system. Workers are to decide if and how their client’s situation fits available avenues into housing. Workers
then advocate for clients who they believe meet the official standards of service organizations by “fitting” their clients into the official frameworks offered by services. Although some clients do not neatly fit all technicalities embedded in formal criteria, workers often feel that they are still worthy of housing support and “fit” these clients into the system anyway. Policy does not accommodate certain types of clients, despite their need for housing.

I then turn to the topic of “Establishing Working Agreements with Landlords” in Chapter 7, focusing on the assertive advocates’ strategies for gaining housing for their clients. At this point in the process, street-level bureaucrats must facilitate what I term “referral management,” involving their active and continued negotiation and management between housing gatekeepers and homeless clients who have (or are about to receive) housing support. This chapter explores how street-level bureaucrats reached working agreements with landlords and property managers regarding satisfactory housing units and acceptable renters during my fieldwork. Drawing primarily on my observations shadowing a street-level bureaucrat who was heavily involved in inspecting potential rental units and working out client housing placements, I discuss the challenges such workers faced in reaching rental agreements with landlords and the strategies they utilized to achieve this goal.

For social service workers who embrace assertive advocacy, placing their clients in housing is often not the end of their involvement in their clients’ lives. Assertive advocates recognize the need to assist clients in meeting expectations that will enable them to stay housed. Workers must convince their clients to follow through with the case plan and alleviate clients’ feelings of frustration and demoralization. Chapter 8 focuses on resolving issues with clients’ apprehensions about housing. To do so, I provide a case study of a case worker, Anna, and her client, Gene. Anna’s long relationship with Gene was vital to his success in maintaining housing. Successful assertive advocates recognize that patience and persistence with their clients—however stressful—often produce positive results in the end. Many workers realize that although the consequences of being refused housing do not directly affect them, they sympathize with their homeless clients who feel the sting of being refused housing or delays in the housing system. They model the necessary patience that the housing process warrants given the persisting roadblocks, and they address client behaviors that could lead to evictions. In doing so, assertive advocates once again go above and beyond their official job descriptions.

In the final chapter of Red-Tape Warriors, I summarize the findings of my research and discuss the implications of this book. I consider how social service workers optimize effective outcomes for homeless clients in the context of confusing, muddled, and at times contradictory policies that characterize social services in the United States today. As the cases in this book show, many workers exhibit a strong commitment to going the extra mile as street-level bureaucrats on behalf of their clients, which can empower their homeless clients in pursuing housing. I also consider the relevance of my findings for
street-level bureaucrats in positions beyond social service work, such as health-care, education, and criminal justice.

Notes
1 Names of respondents, clients, and agencies were given aliases to protect their identity in this study.
2 Please see Figure 6.1.