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GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

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Executive Summary

Business as Usual? A Wake-Up Call for The Human Services

Results from the Human Service Workforce Study

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Human service agencies are the "first responders" for people in need. However, during the last three decades, new policies that draw on business principles, methods and goals have restructured the human service in ways that dramatically affect agencies, workers, and clients in both the public and non-profit sectors. Increasingly referred to as Managerialism, these trends have created a sea change in social work, and thus are the subject of this report.

To add the voice of human service workers to the debates over Managerialism, we surveyed nearly 3,000 New York City human service workers. Scholars from various disciplines and many countries have studied the impact of Managerialism on the scale and scope of social welfare programs and client outcomes.[1] Far fewer have asked front line workers, supervisors, program managers, and agency directors – tasked with translating policy into practice – about their experience with this new management model.[2]

Six partners helped to design and implement a survey aimed at the human service workforce: *the National Association of Social Workers-NYC Chapter*; *the Human Services Council*; *United Neighborhood Houses*; *The Coalition of Behavioral Health Agencies*; *the Social Service Employees Union Local 371*; and *the New York Non-Profit Press*. The *Human Service Workforce Study: Your Voice is Needed* was distributed through partners using their membership lists, websites, and internal emails. *The New York Non-Profit Press* also provided a link to the survey in its electronic newspaper. Survey distribution occurred between January 2014 and June 2015 and was completed by 3,027 individuals. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of Hunter College, CUNY and Touro College and analyzed using SPSS version 22.

Managerialism in NYC Human Services

The indicators of Managerialism used in this study were selected from empirical studies of the impact of Managerialism within human service organizations in the US and internationally. These indicators fell into four categories that speak to changes in organizational structures and practices: Productivity, Accountability, Efficiency, and Relationship-Building.

"I went into social work to make a difference. For many years felt I did. However, with the new rules, strict billing requirements, budget cutbacks, increasing reliance on documentation and outcomes, treatment emphasis is no longer client centered. It is driven by the bottom line"

- **Productivity**: Work speed-up is highly problematic for workers in any sector, but especially for those tasked with helping vulnerable, often traumatized individuals and communities. As an organizational strategy, "speed-up" is meant to maximize productivity, but in the process, it can intensify the impact of austerity-driven budget cuts on services and the work force. The majority of HSWS respondents (>80%) across different positions, agencies, and types of services identified endless pressures for ever more productivity as highly problematic.

  "We can't serve and help our participants if we are constantly stressing about productivity and paperwork"

- **Accountability:** In the past, human service accountability focused on professional ethics, social legislation, and community needs. In today's performance environment, managerial accountability emphasizes effectiveness measured and monitored by auditing outcomes.[3] Everyone wants to be accountable. However, workers are worried about the pressure to quantify and measure outcomes, and the push to standardize and routinize interventions. Nearly 70% of our respondents reported that their work had become standardized or routinized.

  "In our work, it is important to recognize that not everything can be quantified. Funders and others calling for accountability need to acknowledge the qualitative nature of our work"

- **Efficiency:** Managerialism's emphasis on efficiency has led to the re-organization of work and the adaptation of "lean and mean" management methods that exert increased control over workers and work processes. Fueled by budget cuts, these include staff reductions, greater flexibility in the deployment of remaining staff, and real-time technological monitoring of case management. The managerial emphasis on efficiency encourages human service agencies to compete with one another to provide services at the lowest cost. This may please funders but does not necessarily result in high-quality services. Over 70% of our respondents reported a range of problematic efficiency issues that affect the quality of services.

  "In this work, computers and efficiency experts are better served then the client who is need of housing or mental health care"

- **Relationships:** Relationship-building is the hallmark of the human services and key to attaining positive client outcomes.[4] However, to the extent that Managerialism is operationalized in the workplace, workers felt that if often compromised this fundamental dimension of human service practice. As the pressure increases to ensure productivity, accountability, and efficiency, the focus on measuring successful outcomes competes with the focus on building trusting relationships with clients and shifts time away from addressing complex client needs. Well over half the respondents identified several aspects of Managerialism that imperiled the therapeutic relationship,

  "The focus has been taken off people and placed on outcomes. I remember when it was possible to sit with my clients and develop a relationship without having to type in the middle of an interview"

including time constraints, emphasis on short-term goals, and the need to open and close cases quickly.

Managerialism is Associated with Barriers to Quality Service Provision

A commitment to Managerialism conflict with the organizational factors that typically determine a high-quality work environment in the social and human services. We found that where agency commitment to Managerialism was higher, workers reported the following threats to key conditions associated with high quality services.

- **Less Professional Autonomy:** Managerialism's reliance on performance-based incentives, standardized questions, scripted interventions, and outcome measures often limit their professional autonomy and discretionary decision-making power regarding client needs and the provision of care.[5] It also risks favoring organizational, bureaucratic, and market needs over professional ideals. *Sixty percent of respondents overall indicated that less professional autonomy was a problem in their workplace.*

  "Rather than treating social workers as skilled, independent practitioners we now treat them as people to monitor and even give them scripts to follow in team meetings. Very little use of professional judgment and skill"

- **Staff Shortages:** Managerialism's promise to increase performance while cutting costs has made reducing staff and hiring less-skilled workers more appealing to organizations.[6] In labor-intensive settings, such "thin staffing" results in reduced service provision, fewer resources for supervision and training,[7] less attention to client needs, and a potential deskilling of the human service workforce. *Sixty-eight percent of participants reported staff/program cuts in their workplace.*

  "My agency has experienced a significant decline in staffing, while continuing to develop new policies that create more work for the few remaining staff members who stay committed to the agency mission"

- **Lack of Time for Supervision:** Quality supervision depends on the training, expertise, and experience of the supervisor,[8] and the capacity of agencies to allocate "unhurried and un-harried" time to the task.[9] When pressed to meet managerial demands for productivity, accountability, and efficiency, agencies often cut back on supervision of staff and student interns. *Over half (53.6%) reported that lack of access to supervision was a problem in their workplace.*

  "Having enough time for adequate clinical supervision is a real problem in most human service agencies, despite the very vulnerable populations we serve"

- **Absence of a Collaborative Environment:** Managerialism's incentives often make it more difficult for agencies to sustain collaboration. The emphasis on competition and reduced support from supervisors and coworkers can weaken the sense of community and the social fabric of the agency. Such an unsupportive environment can limit an agency's ability to promote creativity, emotional well-being, and self-care.[10] *In terms of lack of support, 63% of participants reported that lack of supervisor support was a problem, and 48% that lack of co-worker support was a problem.*

"I've often been left to "fend for myself" which goes against the dynamic process of social work education and also ultimately diminishes the efficacy of services provided to clients"

- **Limited Access for Clients:** Managerialism creates incentives for agencies to limit access to services by constructing entry barriers. To this end, it calls for high fees and strict eligibility rules, and results in long wait times, crowded waiting rooms, busy phone lines, and insensitivity to differences[11]. Access is also limited by "creaming," the process by which agencies intentionally restrict services to those who are easier to serve; "skimping," or limiting services for high cost clients; and "dumping," or avoiding high-cost clients altogether.[12] *Sixty-one percent of respondents indicated that long wait times were a problem in their workplace.*

"Managed care and copayments are increasingly making mental health services inaccessible to the poor. Meanwhile we are told to refer more patients to other services"

- **Constrained Advocacy**: Managerialism limits the scope of human services by constraining advocacy. It calls for prioritizing agency over community accountability, investing fewer resources in changing social policy, and substituting successful performance and measurable outcomes for social change and social justice goals. *Seventy-four percent of respondents indicated too few efforts to mobilize people for social change, and 75% that too few resources devoted to changing policy were a problem.*

"Advocacy for a client or collective action to address a problem are abandoned based on fears of undermining program collaborations or funding partners"

- **Bending The Rules and Leaving the Profession:** Managerial pressure toward high productivity and successful outcomes creates perverse incentives for workers to "bend the rules" by faking statistics, conducting work slow-downs, refusing to comply with paperwork demands, and/or consciously changing reports to meet performance expectations.[13] To deal with these job-related dilemmas, some workers decide to work overtime while others think about leaving their jobs, leading to organizational problems with high turnover and staff retention. *Seventy percent reported that they worked overtime without pay often/very often; 30% reported inflating statistics to meet contract demands was a problem at their workplace. Sixty-seven percent reported that turnover was a problem in their workplace.*

- **More Stress on the Job:** The quality of working conditions under Managerialism—increased demands for accountability, reduced autonomy, increased routinization, staff shortages, inadequate supervision, and ethical challenges—are a recipe for stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction. The resulting turnover interrupts the continuity of care and threatens to decimate the ranks of the next generation of human service workers. *Seventy-three percent of participants reported that their job was often/very often too stressful, and 86% that burnout was a problem in their workplace*

- **Agency Commitment to Managerialism:** Managerialism shifts human services away from the "logic of social work" towards the "logic of the market", creating tradeoffs that ultimately threaten the well-being of workers, the quality of services, and the common good. The strongest results in this study showed that workers employed by agencies with a low managerial commitment felt more positive about the quality of their work, its contribution to society, and support for agency mission. Those who worked in agencies with a high commitment to managerial priorities reported more problems with service provision and more workplace dilemmas. *Problems with professional autonomy, staff shortages, supervision, access, and advocacy were reported by 40% to 56% of workers in settings with a high commitment to Managerialism and by 30% to 35% of those in setting with a medium commitment compared to only 13-25% in low managerial settings.*

The results of this study indicate that Managerialism is having a profound effect on human services in New York City, but also shine a light on possible change. Respondent's voices from the field guide recommendations. The results of this report are a *Wake-Up Call* that can be used to inform agency practitioners, program directors and executives, social work deans, faculty and students, agency funders, policy makers, and elected officials about the impact of Managerialism on direct practice, service provision, worker well-being, and the future of the profession.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Respondents' voices guide these recommendations. They identify major problems with the Managerial environment that merit immediate discussion by the wider human service community.

They say:

"This survey is long overdue"

"Helping to build a larger narrative of the direct service crisis we are experiencing is so important"

We say:

Act on what we know: This *Wake-Up Call* can be used to inform the human service field about the impact of Managerialism on direct practice, service provision, worker well-being, and the future of the profession.

Build the evidence base: This report raises critical questions about the benefits of the business model for the human services. Social work research is needed to document Managerialism's true impacts on clients and services over time.

Listen to the Human Service Workforce: Let's draw on the wealth of knowledge, practice wisdom, and the experience of our skilled human service workforce and place social workers at the table where important decisions are made.

Stand up for women and people of color: An honest look is needed to ensure that the human services provide good quality jobs for women and people of color on the frontlines, in leadership, and top management positions.

Challenge the Business Model: Many respondents found elements of Managerialism grounded in business principles and practices to be problematic. Human service workers can challenge the Managerial business model by advocating for human service professionals in agency leadership roles and strengthening our commitment to the values and the mission of Social Work.

Stem the tide of Managerialism: The assumption that the private sector delivers more quality and accountability at a better price underlies the shift towards Managerialism in many human service sectors. Human service workers can participate in this ongoing dialogue and even resist managerialism in areas where social justice and the public good are at stake.

Mobilize the profession to renew commitment to mission: Some fear that organizational mission may become one of Managerialism's major casualties. Grounded in the "logic of social work" rather than "the logic of the market," we can strengthen our capacity to be productive, accountable, efficient, and empirical, in ways that promote quality care, social justice and social change.

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Disclaimer

Some of the views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of specific partner agencies. organizations or research participants.

" Human service agencies are the *first responders* for people in need. "

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