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# SNAP and TANF Administration in New York State Counties: Comparing Case-based, Mixed Methods and Task-Based Processes

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SNAP and TANF Administration in New York State Counties:  
Comparing Case-based, Mixed Methods and Task-Based  
Processes

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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for PAD 690 Masters Project

SUNY Buffalo State

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the administrative style used in New York State (NYS) counties for administering two needs-based federal programs: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Needs-based federally-funded policies have significant implications for public administration and intergovernmental relations because these programs involve public servants in the determination and delivery of services of federally-mandated programs which states deliver through a variety of models (state, county, or contracting with private or nonprofit agencies). In NYS, counties are given this responsibility. While the numbers of persons receiving TANF has leveled off since the Clinton-era welfare reforms, the number of SNAP recipients has increased dramatically, especially over the past decade. The increase in SNAP eligibility, which is expected to continue to climb as more baby boomers retire with inadequate pensions and savings, is straining the state resources (which must pay 50% of SNAP's administration costs). There are three models for administering human services – case-based, task-based, and a mixture of the two. This study utilized a parallel convergent mixed methods design: on strand was the collection of US Census data and the second strand was based on in-depth interviews with county social service directors in NYS. This study inventories administrative styles in a sample of 12 NYS counties and examines potential factors for selection of case-based, task-based, or mixed-methods processing and monitoring of cases. It was found that task-based administration is more likely to be used by counties with a high number of SNAP recipients. It was also found that counties using the task-based method have higher worker productivity than counties using case-based and mixed methods approaches. Availability of technology is an important determinant of whether a county adopts a task-based administrative style. Future research should explore caseworkers' attitudes and input in transitioning to more efficient, task-based systems; for example, one study conducted in Erie County found that millennials are more amenable to technology innovations, which is consistent with the task-based approach.

Keywords: SNAP, case-based administration, process-based administration, New Public Management

## Chapter I: Introduction<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine program administration in New York State (NYS) for two needs-based programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Needs-based federally-funded policies have significant implications for public administration and intergovernmental relations because these programs involve public servants in the determination and delivery of services of federally-mandated programs which states deliver through a variety of models (state, county, or contracting with private or nonprofit agencies).

The first point to be made relates to the budgetary outlay of these programs to ensure American families are provided an acceptable standard of support for nutrition, shelter, and support for re-integrating with the workforce. There were 45,767,000 average monthly recipients of SNAP in 2015 with an average monthly benefit per person of \$126.83. In FY 2015 SNAP cost \$73.98 million, with the federal government expending \$4.3 million of total to administer SNAP (including running pilot programs, monitoring, etc.). (US Department of Agriculture, 2016a). SNAP is an important program for New York residents: in 2014 1,661,672 New Yorkers participated in SNAP (US Department of Agriculture, 2016b). To encourage state to administer SNAP benefits efficiently the federal government requires the states to pay 50 percent of SNAP administration costs (L. Hulsey et al., 2013, pp. ES-1), which can be difficult when states themselves are operating under austerity budgets.<sup>2</sup> Of particular concern is when conditions change so that there is a spike in demand for social welfare programs. So, for example, from 2000 to 2011 (in which parts of the country suffered deeply from the housing bubble collapse and the ensuing collapse of the financial services industry), average monthly participation in SNAP spiked from 17.2 million to 44.7 million people, an increase of almost 160 percent (L. Hulsey et al., 2013, p. 1).

TANF is funded through a block grant to the states, which since 1996 has stayed steady in the range of \$16.5 billion, with states contributing an additional \$15 billion in “maintenance of

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the New York State Office for Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) and the Center for Development and Human Services (CDHS) at SUNY Buffalo State for awarding me with a graduate student fellowship for a two-year period to conduct this research. OTDA officials gave of their time to meet with me, brief me on the main issues, and supply me with resources to acquaint myself with the subject matter. I would also like to thank the county officials in the State of New York who agreed to be interviewed as part of this study.

<sup>2</sup> All U.S. states, apart from Vermont, have a constitutional requirement to balance budgets (Buonanno & Nugent, 2013, p. 224).

effort” (MOE)—a matching requirement mandated by federal law (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2015). SNAP and TANF are often controversial programs targeted by fiscal conservatives often on the grounds of poor implementation and over-granting. And while the federal and state governments offer detailed guidelines to public servants (and agencies in the private and nonprofits sectors contracted to administer these programs), they are nevertheless subject to discretion in their implementation, including by the case manager at the point of contact with the applicant. In sum, SNAP and TANF are funded by both the federal and state governments, with administration of the programs a state responsibility along with implementation costs. Therefore states are incentivized to seek ways to decrease administration costs (improving efficiency), while providing effective service to TANF and SNAP applicants to ensure the social equity objectives of social welfare programs in federal systems.<sup>3</sup> But when the state works with another public agency (the county in the case of NYS), it can be difficult to persuade the state’s agent to administer the program in a cost-effective manner. So, for example, a county social services department might see benefits administration as an opportunity for employing workers, especially in those counties with fewer employment opportunities, and therefore resist modernization efforts that will decrease the number of caseworkers needed to determine eligibility and monitor open cases.

A second aspect of SNAP and TANF with respect to public administration practice is that the successful administration of these programs relies heavily on intergovernmental cooperation. Cooperation is not only required between the federal government and state governments, but between state governments and the entities the state selects as partners for program administration. The federal government has granted states considerable freedom to determine whether partners will be utilized to administer TANF and SNAP, including whether the private and nonprofit sectors will play a role. The US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, funds SNAP (until 2008 known as “food stamps”), while TANF is administered by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families. While TANF is funded through block grants to the states (which gives states considerable discretion), SNAP is 100 percent funded by the federal government. However, state governments and the federal government share the cost of SNAP administration (see above). And while the federal government sets the income requirements for SNAP

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<sup>3</sup> See Norman-Major (2010) on the challenges to balance equity, efficiency, economy, and effectiveness in the practice of public administration.

eligibility, states have considerable discretion in administering the program ranging from the name of the program (e.g. it's called "CalFresh" in California) and in determining asset limits to qualify.

### **SNAP and TANF Administration in New York State**

In NYS, the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) manages the federal block grant for TANF as well as the SNAP program, but gives its counties the responsibility to administer these programs (see New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, 2015). Therefore, NYS has an interest in determining the most effective and efficient method for its counties to administer TANF (for example, more funds available for job readiness programs rather than benefits administration) and SNAP (the state picks up 50 percent of administrative costs). However, as noted above, the "principal-agent" relationship that the federal authorizing legislation creates—with the federal government as the "principal" and the states as the "agents"—is characterized by both the benefits (services delivered closer to the citizen) and the disadvantages (disparate implementation of Washington's intentions) of the principal-agent relationship. In NYS, an additional layer of the principal-agent relationship is created because NYS acts as the principal and its counties as the agents in TANF and SNAP eligibility determination and caseload management. The dynamics of the principal-agent theory (P-A) is a crucial assumption of New Public Management, and its widespread influence in policy circles informed Washington's devolution of the administration of needs-based programs to the states. (P-A theory is highly developed and has been applied to wide set of circumstances in federal systems—for a variety of perspectives, see Breaux, Duncan, Keller, & Morris, 2002; McCubbins, Noll, & Weingast, 1968; Oates, 2005; Pollack, 2002; Rourke, 1991; Van Horn, 1979).

In a study of county processing procedures, Slack and Myer (2014, p. 75) conclude that there are "substantial county-level variation and significant regional patterns." Little is known as to the effect of administration styles on county administration of TANF and SNAP. So, for example, while the U.S. Department of Agriculture conducted a study of SNAP modernization in five states (Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Utah, and Washington), none of these are county-administered states (L. Hulsey et al., 2013, pp. ES-3)—making the findings less directly applicable to NYS, but also suggesting a gap in the literature which this study hopes to begin to fill.

Ridzi (2004, p. 32) states that, “With the passage of the 1996 PRWORA and the subsequent 1997 NYS Welfare Reform act, every county in New York State was required to designate a local commissioner charged with administering the reform’s welfare-to-work (wtw) requirements.” By allowing each county to appoint a commissioner, this person could evaluate their county and administer benefits in the way they thought would work most effectively in that county. With each county within NYS administering SNAP and TANF benefits according to their own views of best practices for the particular county, this sets up the question “how does one define ‘best’?—or perhaps there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach due to sometimes vast differences among counties (e.g. rural vs. urban, low-income vs. high-income, high v. low population density).

The Great Recession of 2007-2014 brought new urgency to the administration of SNAP and TANF because of the increase in NYS residents who were eligible for these benefits—and especially so for SNAP—and as the federal government and state governments sought ways to reduce administrative costs. In a review of several studies on public welfare administration, Slack and Myer (2014, p. 67) argue that since passage of the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996* (i.e., welfare reform), which placed time-limits and work requirements as conditions for the receipt of cash assistance such as TANF, cash welfare caseloads declined. Despite the economic hardships families faced during the Great Recession, TANF caseloads changed little. SNAP, on the other hand, was very responsive to the downturn, with an increase in caseloads that closely tracked the rising numbers of eligible American (Rosenbaum, 2013). With SNAP caseloads increasing during the Great Recession, counties were facing higher administrative costs and pressures to process applications more efficiently. Blake Shaw, Acting Director of New Mexico’s Human Services Department explained in an article about the search for the most efficient administration processes that, “Systems across the country are facing crushing increases in caseloads, diminishing timeliness, operational inconsistencies, poor quality, revolving doors for staff, unhappy customers and costly errors” (B. Shaw, 2009, p. 3). So, for example, during the Great Recession one rural NYS county reported SNAP caseload sizes of 675-1650 leading to back-log created stress for staff and possible over- or under granting of benefits to families (Tioga County DSS, 2011).

Slack and Myer (2014, p. 66) suggest that “counties, in particular, have been advocated as a useful units of analysis... because as governmental units they play an active role in shaping



local frameworks for economic action and redistribution, and thus inequality.” Therefore, given the important role that NYS counties now have in administering SNAP and TANF, they represent an excellent locus of research on effective administrative practices.

Particularly striking is the fact that some counties were able to efficiently handle the increase in demand for SNAP during the Great Recession, while others were plagued by backlogs. A debate around administration emerged, with advocates of a task-based administration style describing it as being superior to the traditional case-based model. Calicchia (2011), in advocating for the new task-based style, suggested that “the advantages of the system is that the supervisor can gauge how much work is being performed, if deadlines are being met and if some workers are having trouble keeping up with assignments more easily than with a caseload system.” Godfrey and Yoshikawa (2012, p. 384) also advocated for task-based administration styles, arguing that “large caseloads can limit the effectiveness of caseworkers by reducing the amount of time they spend with clients and may be particularly detrimental in welfare-to-work programs, which involve multiple program components and decision points.” They also point to other benefits of task-based processes: “Studies in organizational psychology have found that workplace organizational structures interact with the beliefs and actions of individual workers to form an overall office culture. Since caseworkers in a given welfare office are trained collectively, work together daily, implement the same program, and follow the same rules and regulations, an office wide norm for interactional style with recipients is engendered” (363).

On the other side of the argument are proponents of the (traditional) case-based style for administering TANF and SNAP eligibility. They argue that although caseloads increase during economic downturns, benefit’ recipients prefer to have one individual to shepherd them through the application process or when they need to be recertified for benefits. A powerful dynamic in the caseworker-client relationship is the discretion of the street-level bureaucrat: “Lipsky illustrated that frontline workers have a good deal of discretionary power, which ultimately enables them to effect policy implementation at the street level of bureaucracy. Street-level bureaucrats make policy in two related respects. They exercise wide discretion in decisions about citizens with whom they interact. Then, when taken in concert, their individual actions add up to agency behavior” (Ricucci, 2005, p. 90). Therefore, when individual caseworkers are responsible for cases (rather than a team), they might establish rapport with the applicant and would have the ability to decide whether or not to bend the rules to assist applicants who might

not otherwise qualify for benefits. Caseworkers provide other services to recipients as well, such as providing information about other programs, etc.

## **Study Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to learn about the factors leading to the selection of case- and task-based administrative processing in NYS's counties. This purpose suggests a three-pronged approach. The first goal of this project is to inventory the administrative delivery processes NYS counties utilize in their administration of SNAP and TANF. Of the three principal administrative processes – case-based (individual benefits manager), task-based (sometimes called “process-based” – cases processed as a team), and mixed methods (elements of each) – it is unknown the extent to which NYS counties utilize one of these approaches in SNAP and TANF administration. The second task is to learn if there are common characteristics among counties that select a primarily task- or case-based approach. What factors might be associated with a county adopting a task- or case-based approach? Demographics and geography could be important, specifically a county's adoption of an administration style could be affected by population size, area of the county (in square miles), type of county (urban, rural, suburban, and mixed), the percentage of the population living below the poverty line, median household income, educational levels, median income, and the history and tradition of the county. Thus, the second purpose of this study is to understand and document the extent to which certain factors are more amenable to adopting a case- or task-based approach. Finally, this study will also consider another aspect of a county's ability to gain efficiencies and achieve cost savings in SNAP and TANF processing—specifically the utilization of money-saving technology.

## **Significance of the Study**

Answers to these questions could assist NYS OTDA in advising NYS counties in helping them to select the optimal administrative process that balances its needs (such as maintaining an expected level of service) while reducing the costs of determining benefit eligibility and re-certification. This study should also help counties that have not modernized their benefits management process to consider the ways in which technology might be useful in streamlining administrative processing of SNAP and TANF applications.

## **Chapter II: Review of Related Literature**

### **Introduction**

The first section of this review will briefly explain the history of SNAP and TANF (including its predecessor, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)). The second section discusses the Clinton Era Welfare Reform and how the Clinton Era Reforms changed the landscape for nutrition assistance and aid for needy families. The third topic is “devolution” with respect to social welfare administration, which has more directly placed the responsibility for benefits administration at the local (typically, county level). The fourth section discusses the three different types of administration (case-based, task-based, and mixed methods) being used to deliver SNAP and TANF benefits in the NYS counties. This chapter closes with a review of the major findings discussed in the following sections.

### **Administering Programs for Needy Americans**

#### **Aid to Families with Dependent Children**

TANF was established in 1996 by the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act* (PRWORA). Administered by the Department of Health and Human Services, this program succeeded Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The AFDC operated at the federal level and was solely responsible for ensuring recipients received benefits. The consensus in most policy circles was that AFDC had become a “way of life” for many able-bodied individuals. After being criticized by politicians and policy makers for the better part of the 1980s and 1990s for encouraging single mothers to have more children and to not enter the workforce, the federal government and states examined ways to reform welfare in order to promote public welfare as temporary assistance, rather than a long-term benefits program.

#### **Clinton Era Welfare Reform**

PRWORA was set in motion by President Clinton with the aims of providing temporary financial assistance to those in need, while trying to get recipients off assistance and into the workforce. A crucial piece of the reform was the end of the federal government running TANF and determining all of the aspects of what constituted aid for families—that is, policy determination (within parameters), implementation, and administrative devolved to the state level. The idea underlying devolution was that it would allow states to administer TANF according to the best fit

for the particular state, and the state—as laboratories of democracy—would be in a better position to develop innovative programming while being mindful of fiscal responsibility. Devolution of TANF involved the (federal) transfer of funds through block grants from the federal to state governments, which the states administered in a “unitary” fashion with their constituent municipal governments, or with private and nonprofit contractors. Mead (2003, p. 163) pointed out that during the late 1980s into the mid-1990s AFDC caseloads rose 32 percent; after the PRWORA reforms were established, caseloads fell fifty-eight percent. What factors account for this decline? In an exhaustive review of studies, Mead (2003, p. 166) offered the following reasons:

Caseload growth will be smaller, or caseload fall greater, in states that have the following features compared to the average state: 1. Low or falling welfare benefit levels, as these features reduce eligibility for aid. 2. High or rising participation levels in welfare work programs. 3. High or rising assignment of clients in such programs to searching for jobs or actually working, rather than to education or training. 4. High or improving enforcement of child support. 5. High levels of governmental quality. 6. Caseload demographics tending to reduce dependency—less unwed pregnancy or greater employability. 7. Favorable economic conditions, particularly low unemployment.

## **SNAP**

SNAP has followed a different course from that of TANF. Klerman and Danielson (2011, p. 863) pointed out that that the SNAP caseload grew by 140 percent from mid-2000 to mid-2010, such that at the end of that period over one in eight U.S. residents was a recipient of SNAP benefits. So when looking at these two differences, we see that even though overall caseloads for TANF are in decline, the SNAP caseload has been increasing. With TANF eligibility becoming stricter over this time period, and with states having considerably more discretion over determining how to use TANF block grant funds, this could explain the discrepancy on why overall TANF caseloads are falling, while SNAP caseloads are increasing. Indeed, during the last two economic recessions – the dot.com bubble’s collapse and the 2007/8 collapse of the financial services industry—eligibility requirements for SNAP become looser even though the requirements for full TANF benefits remained the same.

The rise of SNAP eligibility has inspired the U.S. Department of Agriculture to promulgate “modernization” models and initiatives that show promise of achieving SNAP’s goals of “efficiency, access, and integrity” (L. Hulsey et al., 2013, pp. ES-2). States, too, which must pay 50 percent of SNAP’s administration costs, have been seeking to decrease the costs of administration. And while the Great Recession had ended at the time of this writing, monthly

recipients of SNAP benefits continued to be high. Increasingly, the federal and state governments began to recognize that retired baby boomers were qualifying for SNAP, and, the pressure on its administration was going to continue as a result.

### **First and Second Order Devolution**

First Order Devolution refers to a situation when the federal government requires states to administer programs previously administered by federal agencies. Central to the Clinton Welfare Reform (PRWORA) was that states would now be expected to create their own ways to administer TANF and SNAP in the most efficient manner in what has been termed “second order devolution” (Kim & Fording, 2010). Second Order Devolution, however, refers to a type of intergovernmental cooperation in which the state government devolves responsibility from the state government to local government (or the private and public sectors) to administer programs (Kim & Fording, 2010). (Some states do not use second-order devolution, but for the purpose of this study, NYS will be the focus.)

When looking at NYS, the variance in demographics within the state, county by county, can be quite marked. NYS is home to the country’s largest city, but also has many mid-sized (Buffalo, Rochester, Yonkers, and Syracuse) and small cities (e.g. Niagara Falls, Utica, Albany). NYS also contains many rural and suburban counties, with some counties combining urban, suburban, and rural (e.g. Erie, Monroe, Westchester, and Onondaga). These differences in population, clientele, and the amount of area a county covers can affect eligibility requirements as well as the style of administration of TANF and SNAP benefits (Bannink & Ossewaarde, 2012). NYS was particularly hard hit by the economic crisis of 2008 because of its negative impact on the financial industry (thus, Wall Street from where so much of NYS’s personal and corporate income originates), thereby increasing unemployment rates in the state, leading to increased eligibility for TANF, but most especially SNAP. And while NYS was experiencing a demand for public welfare programs, the state was experiencing a loss in tax revenues due to decreases in personal and corporate income. Therefore, Albany became more interested in finding models that reduced administrative costs of these programs.

The Great Recession of 2008, coupled with devolution created the arena for differences in TANF and SNAP administration not only on a state to state level, but also county by county level (Bannink & Ossewaarde, 2012). With the type of administration being left up to the county

to choose what it sees as the best model, bordering counties in NYS are using different models to accomplish the task of administering benefits (personal communication with OTDA representatives). With counties using different styles of administration to implement TANF and SNAP benefits, it has engendered a discussion as to what types of administration are best suited for servicing NYS residents in the most efficient and effective way possible.

## **Types of Administration**

First- and second-order devolution has been the driving force behind the differences not only between states, but also within states (Kim & Fording, 2010; Osborne, 2006). Many states—including New York, have permitted counties to decide for themselves as to the best way to administer benefits to their respective populations. There are three competing models of TANF and SNAP administration within NYS: case-based, task-based and mixed methods. These methods can be associated with aspects of the four principal paradigms of public administration: traditional public administration (with an emphasis on bureaucratic rules), New Public Management (which sees the citizen as a customer to be served, and owes much to the service model borrowed from the private sector), New Public Service (or Governance) (citizens to be served and consulted, rather than simply customers to be served), and New Public Administration (which emphasizes social equity as equally, if not more important, than efficiency and economy in the delivery of public services).

### **Case-Based Administration**

Case-based administration is the “historical way of doing business in human services” (OTDA-Audit & Quality Improvement, 2011, p. 2). Caseworkers are given sets of rules and procedures to follow in what are traditionally hierarchical governmental bureaucracies. This is the Wilsonian traditional notion of public administration which attempts a strict separation of politics (election and appointment officials) from civil servants (Wilson, 1887). In this style of administration, a caseworker assists the applicant through all the necessary steps in the TANF and SNAP application process in a “holistic” approach to caseload management, while adhering to the rules set forth by the top administrators. Case managers implement the law at the frontline, representing the government agency to the client. (See Box 1 for a summary of the characteristics of case-based administration.)

There are, however, a number of risks involved with case-based management. First with only one person looking after all these clients, a caseworker may become “burned out” in *perfect storm* scenarios as occurs with natural disasters and economic recessions. Second, when the caseworker is struggling with a backlog of cases clients may not be awarded their proper benefits or benefits may be over-granted. Finally, task-based management may be a less effective mode of case administration because, as Godfrey and Yoshikawa (2012, p. 384) suggest, large caseloads “can limit the effectiveness of caseworkers by reducing the amount of time they spend with clients and may be particularly detrimental in welfare-to-work programs, which involve multiple program components and decision points.”

**Box 1: Case Management and Process Management: Compared**

<b>Case Management</b>	<b>Process/Task Management</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delivery of Services is based on the caseworker providing an assessment and then arranging; referring; coordinating; monitoring; and evaluating the delivery of services to meet the needs of individuals and families assigned.</li> <li>• Specialized and unique services are delivered based on the case circumstances.</li> <li>• Normally the client is involved in the decision making process as to how a case is to proceed.</li> <li>• Each case is individualized for worker and client.</li> <li>• Caseworker success is based on overall status of caseload and customer outcomes.</li> <li>• Citizen as “client.”</li> <li>• Rooted in traditional public administration.</li> <li>• New Public Administration plays a role because caseworkers can exercise discretion in promoting social equity, even if the client may not strictly qualify for benefits according to a strict interpretation of implementation guidelines.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delivery of Services is based on the breakdown of specified tasks that are prioritized to meet the needs of individuals and families assigned.</li> <li>• Specialized and unique services are delivered based on priority of the case circumstances.</li> <li>• Customer involvement in the decision making process is minimal. It is the priority and placement of the task in the process that drives the decision making of how a case is to proceed.</li> <li>• Processes are individualized.</li> <li>• Worker success is based on meeting daily set standards.</li> <li>• Citizen as “customer.”</li> <li>• Rooted in “New Public Management” because efficiency, effectiveness, and cost savings are emphasized and key factors.</li> </ul>
<p>Source: (Denhardt &amp; Denhardt, 2011; OTDA- Audit &amp; Quality Improvement, 2011, p. 3)</p>	

The benefits of case-based administration derive from the caseworker’s sense of “ownership” of an assigned caseload; the caseworker as guide to the applicant; the satisfaction a caseworker derives from working with an applicant; and the more holistic approach to providing human service program support. By knowing the specifics of the various situations in their caseload, a caseworker might know clients who have special needs and may be better to handle the

difficulties that come with particular cases. Case workers in a case-based administration style are the “shepherds” of their caseload, and are the individuals to whom clients turn when there is a problem. Case-based administration allows its workers to connect on a more personal level with their clients, which in turn, is associated with better communication between the worker and a client. This in return could lead to the client and case worker to work together in order to ensure clients get certified and re-certified in a timely fashion.

When a county has multiple people overseeing a case, the client may not know whom to contact, or may be uncomfortable contacting someone whom they don’t know. This may lead to a client to not return phone calls or documents in a timely fashion. This could lead to some clients feeling like they are just a “number,” and that their county is not committed to helping those in need of human services. Placed in the broad context of approaches to public administration, the discretion which clients sometimes count on through the narratives shared with their caseworkers all but disappears in the task-based/process approach to case administration (see Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Riccucci, 2005 with respect to the relationship between citizen-clients and the street-level bureaucrat).

### **Task Based or Process Management**

Task-based administration, otherwise known as process management is informed by New Public Management (NPM). NPM, which was embraced at the federal level during the Clinton-Gore Administration, emphasizes the role of bureaucrats as managers whose job it is to provide efficient services at the lowest possible cost to the citizenry. Rather than the connection to the client-caseworker in a caretaker-type situation (the benevolent, but fair-minded public servant applying the laws enacted by elected officials in the Wilsonian public administration model), in a task-based system, no individual worker “owns” a case; instead, it is owned by the team (Calicchia, 2011). The supervisor assigns tasks to a worker based on what needs to be done in a given day or week. The assignment can change each day, dependent upon the supervisor’s determination as to the most urgent tasks. In a task-based system, more workers can be assigned to the most pressing tasks and some tasks may be set aside until the more pressing tasks are completed. This illustrates not only the division of tasks between workers, but also the liquidity of how a manager can prioritize what he or she feels is the most important task at that specific point in time. For recipients the “service delivery” is based on the breakdown of specified tasks that are prioritized to meet the needs of individuals and families. In practice, a client is no longer



the responsibility of a single caseworker as in the traditional human service model. Instead, a client's case is a team responsibility. Each team member is responsible for a specific task within the benefit determination process (OTDA- Audit & Quality Improvement, 2011).

One benefit related to the task-based model of administration is the liquidity when it comes to task assignment and division. By being able to adjust when needed allows for the supervisor or manager to see where there are peaks and valleys, within the division of tasks, and can move workers onto different tasks if need be. This ability to move workers when needed in order to deal with overflows in activity, whether it be in intake or processing re-certifications, is monitored by the supervisor and his or her knowledge regarding how to best handle the ebb and flow of day to day activities. The ability of managers to communicate with subordinates to see where more assistance or focus needs presumably allows them to better manage day to day functions and maximize the output of their staff within the task-based model.

In a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (L. Hulse et al., 2013, pp. ES-5) on SNAP administration in Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Utah, and Washington, it was found that “modernization” usually “brought an increase in specialization of staff functions within local offices. Although specific changes varied by state, the general shift was away from the traditional caseworker model—in which a single worker owns a case from application for as long as the household remains on SNAP—to a process model, in which different staff focus on different tasks in the certification and case management process.”

But switching to a process-based approach has important implications for the quality of working life and feelings of efficacy of the caseworker. As street-level bureaucrats, caseworkers have the ability to exercise more discretion in the case-based as compared to the team (process) approach (see Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003 for a discussion of the policy-making discretion exercised by frontline bureaucrats). Thus, the process approach acts to remove a great deal of the discretion caseworkers had exercised in traditional case-based administration. This might be a positive attribute for supervisors and managers, but given the already high turnover among (underpaid) public welfare benefits' caseworkers, it does not seem wise to adopt a process without providing information regarding the benefits of the task-approach, and ensuring proper training, etc. before the transition begins.

### **Mixed Methods Approach**

The mixed methods approach uses elements of the task- and case-based styles (L. Hulsey, Conway, Kevin , Gothro, Andrew , Kleinman, Rebecca , Reilly, Megan , Cody, Scott , Sama-Miller, Emily, 2013). The way in which the benefits are administered depends on judgments by management. So, for example, there could be a task-based style of intake, with case workers then assigned cases after clients receive their benefits and are processed. The way a mixed methods is set up can be determined by factors such as size of caseloads, population of the county, the economy, and last but not least the way the manager or director believes the tasks should be administered (Mead, 2003; Ridzi, 2004).

Of the three different models, the mixed methods is believed to be the less frequently adopted. It seems to be a method that is used when getting ready to transition from one style to another rather than a conscious decision to adopt a style incorporating aspects of both the case- and task-based administration styles.

### **The Role of Technology in SNAP and TANF Administration**

The federal government has been aggressive in promoting the use of technology to reduce costs and improve efficiencies in the administration of TANF and SNAP. In the previous cited study of five states that were modernizing their SNAP administration systems, technology was found to be a key component of their success (L. Hulsey et al., 2013). Modernization has also been supported through federal grants; for example the U.S. Department of Agriculture has funded innovative projects for streamlining application processing and improving technology in public and nonprofit agencies through its annual competition for “SNAP Process and Technology Improvement Grants” and also awards performance bonuses for “Exceptional Nutrition Assistance Service” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2016). Similarly, TANF also promotes streamlining TANF processing through enhancements to technology, funding which is allowable in TANF block grant funds. Indeed, the trend has been to build integrated technology systems for TANF, SNAP, and other public benefit programs (such as Medicaid, which has seen an increase in benefit determinations under the Affordable Care Act), because most low-income individuals and families qualify for multiple public benefit programs. Examples of modernization include client portals, eligibility systems and business rules engines, call center technology, electronic data matching, document imaging and management, data management and analytics, and mobile tools (T. Shaw & Streett, 2015, p. 4).

## **Conclusions**

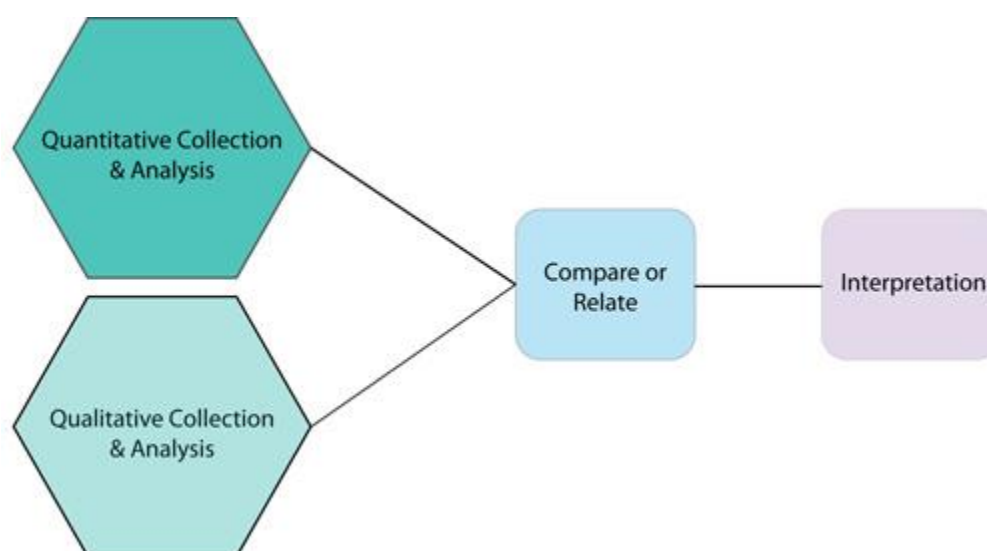
The literature suggests that each type of administration style serves a purpose and can be successful if created and maintained in the right environment; however, the NPM trend of emphasizing “efficiency” and “economy” is increasingly more attractive over the “service” and case manager’s discretion attributes in the traditional case-management administrative style. This is partly driven by the rise in SNAP beneficiaries and projections that SNAP will continue to face pressure as baby boomers with inadequate pensions qualify for nutrition assistance. Increasingly, the federal government has been urging states to modernize their SNAP and TANF administrative systems through the adoption of technology. The U.S. Department of Education has been funding projects to improve SNAP administration with technological innovations, and HHS permits states to use TANF block funds for technology improvements.

## Chapter III: Methodology and Data Analysis

### Design of Study

The research design for this study of SNAP and TANF administration in NYS is a “Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods Design” (CPMMD) (Creswell, 2014, pp. 220-228), depicted in Figure 1. CPMDD combines the strengths of open-ended interviews (qualitative) with quantitative measures (in this case, databases) in order to develop a more holistic understanding of this study’s principal research question—the factors contributing to a NYS county’s choice of task-process-based administration or mixture of the two types in TANF and SNAP eligibility and recertification determinations. Rather than simply “triangulating” the data, CPMDD offers a logical path for data collection.

**Figure 1 Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods Design**



Source: <http://www.measuringu.com/blog/mixing-methods.php>

There are two strands of this investigation – the database containing key data about the county and another strand focusing on the public administrators themselves. Together, these two strands “converge” to form a more complete “picture” of the county with respect to this study’s purpose. An example will illustrate this point. A study of US Census Bureau data may lead the researcher to conclude that the size of the county’s population, the number of SNAP applications, and the county’s classification as rural or urban might be correlated with the selection of task-based or case-based administration practices; however, correlation is not tantamount to causation. The

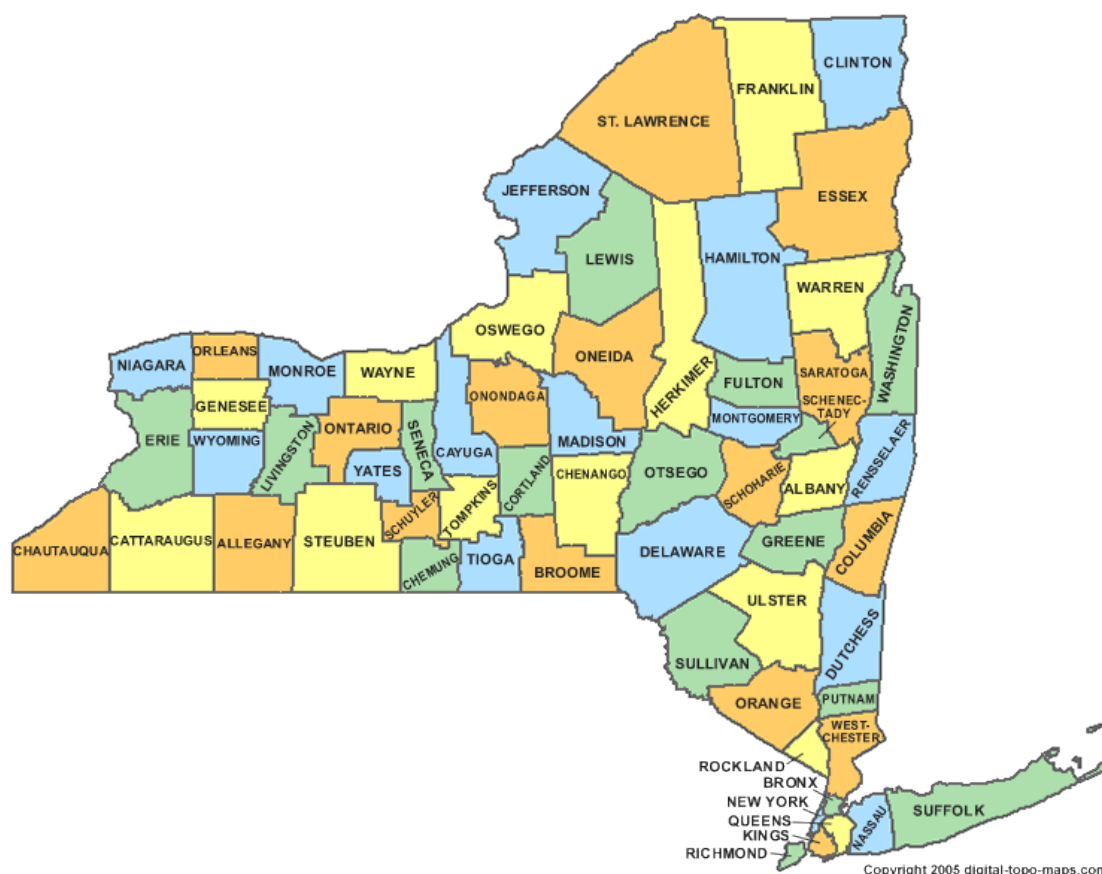
qualitative strand will bring dimension to the findings by incorporating “the perspectives of individuals” (Hollohan, 2014).

## Sample Selection and Description of Participants

This project used a statistical design ( $n > 10$ )<sup>4</sup> to differentiate the styles of TANF and SNAP administration used in NYS. To determine what kind of administration type best serves the county and New York residents, the researcher (working with OTDA) selected a sample of 12 counties<sup>5</sup>: Albany, Erie, Niagara, Schenectady, Onondaga, Tioga, Jefferson, Monroe, Oswego, Broome, Schoharie, and Westchester. These counties were selected to reflect the overall makeup of New York State. (See Figure 2 Map of New York State Counties.)

The study included a comparison of these counties based on a number of statistical measures. Semi-structured interviews (a combination of closed- and open-ended questions) were conducted with social services’ directors or their designees.

Figure 2 Map of New York State Counties



<sup>4</sup> The author follows the convention of  $n=1$  is a case study;  $n$  of 2-9 is the comparative method; and  $n \geq 10$  is considered a statistical design.

<sup>5</sup> The counties were selected to ensure that the different characteristics of NYS counties were included with respect to urban/rural; low median and high median income; high and low population density. The New York City boroughs are routinely excluded from such studies due to “outlier” issues. Due to the makeup of the New York City boroughs (large populations), they must be excluded because they do not capture the overall makeup of the rest of New York State. So while this “technically” a (nonprobability) convenience sample, it mirrored aspects of the stratified sampling procedure in that it attempted to adequately represent the whole population of counties in sample selection.

## Data Collection

The data in this report are derived from both published sources and data generated by the researcher. The quantitative data were collected from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, which provides running estimates and demographic information between decennial compilations of the Census. Demographic data such as population, county size in square miles, median income, unemployment rate, percent of population with a high school degree, percentage of population with a bachelor’s degree, and percentages of population using SNAP were all taken from the 5 year estimates of the American Community Survey.<sup>6</sup> These independent variables are important because it paints a picture of a county’s situation. These data points for each county allows for comparison of different factors depending on certain traits of each county and also factors that may be similar between counties.

The other data source was created from interviews. The researcher conducted multiple in-depth face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with administrators of social programs in the 12 sample counties. OTDA provided information regarding delivery classifications of SNAP services known to date for target counties. The interviews also collected information as to the role of technology in SNAP administration.

The interview questions were designed to gain in-depth knowledge of the administration styles of the counties being studied. The data collected from this instrument gauged factors such as how long a director had been in place, number of cases per county, whether the state allotted money to buy technology, whether or not a county had a call center, etc. See Table 1 Data Pertaining to Administrative Styles & Technology.

**Table 1 Data Pertaining to Administrative Styles & Technology**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Measurement</b>
Length of time Director in Place	Years
Years Director Employed in County	Years
Length of time current administration has been in place	Years
Administration Style	1=Case-based 2=Task-based 3=A mix of the two styles
Staff Permitted to Suggest Changes	1=Low 2=Medium 3=High
Amount of Technology	1=Low 2=Medium 3=High
Amount of Cases within County	Provided by OTDA
Amount of Workers within County	Provided by OTDA

<sup>6</sup> The 2010 numbers may not be representative of “normal” times due to the 2008 Great Recession.

Caseload	Provided by OTDA
Ability to Change Focus of Tasks/Needs	1=Low 2=Medium 3=High
Workers Buy into Culture	1=Low 2=Medium 3=High

## Data Analysis

Table 2 County Characteristics contains the statistical average (mean) for each of the factors measured.

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>
<b>FACTOR</b>	<b>CASE BASED</b>	<b>TASK BASED</b>	<b>MIXED METHODS</b>
Population	76,506	261,444	512,682
Size Sq. Miles	1242	853	812
% pop. w/ Bachelors	18.3	27.1	33.4
Years as Director	3	3	7
Years at County	21	21	29
# of SNAP cases w/in County	4740	20260	30992
# of workers w/in County	20	20	52
# of SNAP cases per worker	228	899	764
Unemployment %	12.1	9.2	7.6
Median Income	\$49,543	\$52,601	\$56,232
Signs of Support Staff	1	2	2
Years Current Type of Administration in Place	14	4	4

Given the small n (12) and the variability among counties (see Table 4: Range Values for Counties), the data analysis is descriptive rather than inferential.

The tendency to use one of the three administrative styles seems to differ by population, with case-based being more prevalent in smaller counties (population mean of 76,506), while task-based (population mean of 261,444) and mixed-methods (population mean of 512,682) is more likely in counties with higher populations. This result suggests that at least some form of task-based is needed in the counties with higher-population.

The results in **Table 1** also indicate that the larger the size of the county (measured in square miles), utilization of the case-based style of administration is more likely. The case-based mean of 1242 (sd=870) is nearly 400 square miles more than both task-based and mixed methods that respectively have means of 853 (sd=576) square miles and 812 (sd=316) square miles. This

finding illustrate that more rural and less populated counties will tend to use a case-based style of administration.

Counties with a higher proportion of residents with a bachelor's degree or higher also differs across the three administration types. Mixed methods have a mean of 33.35 percent (sd=8.2282), task-based came in second with a mean of 27.126 percent (sd=7.7142), while the counties utilizing the case-based style have the lowest percentage of residents with a bachelor's degree with 18.3 percent (sd=.9899). This finding could indicate that in counties with a lower proportion of residents with the bachelor's degree, counties may have found that residents needs the more intensive client-public administrator relationship characteristic of the case-based style.

Mixed methods lead the way when it comes to the number of cases within a county with a mean of 30912 (sd=24131.001). Task-based had a mean of 20260 cases per county (sd=24641.722), and case-based had a very low 4740 cases per county (sd=3922.321). These numbers indicate that with a larger number of cases, counties are more likely to use either a task-based or mixed methods administrative style – once again supporting the need to adopt a more efficient style (even if this style may come at the expense of the traditional human services relationship established between client and caseworker in the case-based method). The “luxury” of this level of service seems to becoming less feasible in counties with a higher number of applicants.

Mixed methods also led the way when it comes to worker per county with a mean of 52 (sd=41.176). That was nearly double the amount of both case-based (sd=13.435) and task-based (sd=14.306), each with an average of 20 workers per county.

It can also be seen that task-based counties had less than half the average staff compared to mixed methods counties, but had the highest mean when it came to the number of cases per worker with a county. The mean of task based was 899 cases per worker (sd=596.4913); mixed methods came in second with a mean of 764 cases per worker (sd=319.2408); and, case-based came in last with a mean of 228 cases per worker (sd=44.1722). These data are compelling because they indicate that counties with a task-based administration style are more efficient at processing SNAP applications—they process and re-certify more SNAP applications and monitor SNAP clients with fewer staff than both the task-based (which is quite inefficient by comparison) and the mixed-methods (which is less efficient than task-based, but more efficient than case-based). The productivity ratio (output as measured by cases/number of workers needed



to produce the output) are 44.95 percent for task-based, 14.7 percent (mixed-methods), and 11.4% for case-based. Thus, if efficiency is the main goal of SNAP determination and client servicing, than task-based is far superior to both case-based and mixed-methods.

These averages need to be studied within the context of “variability”—therefore, standard deviation and ranges are reported in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3 Standard Deviation for Counties

<b>FACTOR</b>	<b>CASED BASED</b>	<b>TASK BASED</b>	<b>MIXED METHODS</b>
Population	61881	307305	347613
Size Sq. Miles	870	576	316
% pop. w/ Bachelors	.990	7.714	8.228
Years as Director	.707	2.250	3.930
Years at County	5.65	5.12	7.47
# of cases w/in County	3922.31	24641.72	24131.001
# of workers w/in County	13.435	14.306	41.176
# of cases per worker	44.172	596.491	319.241
Unemployment %	.424	1.511	1.550
Median Income	4563.667	4589.101	13126.357
Support Staff	0.0	.957	.894
Years Current Administration in Place	14.496	1.658	1.966

Table 4: Range Values for Counties

	<b>CASE-BASED</b>		<b>TASK-BASED</b>		<b>MIXED METHODS</b>	
<b>Factor</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>
Population	32743	120262	51125	717813	200600	968802
Size Sq Miles	626	1857	210	1366	450	1227
% Pop w/ Bachelor’s Degree+	17.6%	19.0%	17.9%	36.3%	23.5%	46.1%
Years as Director	3	4	1	6	3	14
Years at County	17	25	16	28	16	36
# cases w/in County	1966	7513	3019	56570	14973	74984
# Workers w/in County	10	29	9	41	15	108
# Cases per Worker	197	259	189	1399	171	1062
Unemployment %	11.8%	12.4%	8.1%	11.4%	4.7%	9.2%
Median Income	\$46316	\$52270	\$46533	\$56783	\$45560	\$81164

The range analysis (see shaded row) corroborates the finding above – task-based are handling more cases with fewer workers as compared to task-based and mixed methods.

The range analysis also supports the finding those counties with a lower percentage of college graduates are more likely to continue to use case-based rather than task-based or mixed methods.

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In conclusion, the analysis demonstrates that in larger counties in terms of area, low population, and a less-education residential population, a case-based administration is more prevalent. The mixed methods system is associated with those counties with large populations, where the counties are trying to gain efficiencies and economies without the major upheaval a full scale change from case-based to task-based management would entail. In other words, the larger counties are balancing efficiencies/economy (task-based) with equity (case-based).

## Chapter IV: Discussion

As discussed earlier in this paper, administrative styles are associated with advantages and disadvantages, each of which the county must weigh in its selection of the case-based, task-based, or mixed methods administrative style. This study found that there are factors that seem to be associated with a county's ability to efficiently administer SNAP benefits – more technology, the presence of a call center, a higher percentage of the population with a bachelor's degree, lower unemployment, if the state has allotted money to that county to buy technology and software, and whether or not the same staff does re-certifications.

The relationship between the selection of administrative style for SNAP administration and county factors is quite apparent. A more educated population is less likely to be affected by economic downturns, but also need less help from caseworkers in applying for benefits. Therefore, the cheaper alternative of the task-based system will generate fewer complaints as compared to a county where more of its residents need one caseworker dedicated to their case.

As the literature review revealed, technology (modernization of SNAP determinations and monitoring) is associated with greater use of the task-based administrative system. When a county has multiple tools to aid caseworkers (and clients), whether it be a call center or case-management software, technology facilitates collaborative teamwork among caseworkers, and helps them to process cases quickly and more efficiently. Whether or not the same workers are responsible for intake and re-certifications becomes important when looking at a case-based style. When a worker has a designated caseload that could continue to grow, the weight of opening new cases and recertifying old ones can lead to both types to be left incomplete because of the crushing burden placed on one person to field calls from clients, open new cases, chase down documents from old clients all in one day in, especially when the number of cases they have is already large.

Interviews with county social services officials provided more depth and background than was possible with the quantitative strand of this study. A number of impressions were gained in these interviews, which are summarized as follows:

1. ***Allow workers to give feedback into the system being run.*** This means, even if a county is not changing from one administration style to another, processes in place can always be improved. The frontline workers know the day to day routines and should be able to express problems with the functioning of the administrative system. By allowing them to voice their

opinions and say what they feel, it allows for directors and workers, together, to develop new and more efficient methods of delivering benefits.

2. ***Technology needs to be utilized.*** State agencies and their county partners need to aggressively compete for technology monies made available from the federal government. There is a whole new group of people entering county services who are comfortable with using electronic eligibility and tracking systems. The comfort level is higher for millennials, an observation corroborated in a recent study of technology comfort levels among baby boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials working at Erie County (Wailand, 2015).
3. ***Support staffing.*** The interviews discussed the role of support staff in assisting case managers. Each county uses its support staff in different ways. Some counties deploy support staff mainly for filing documents, some for front-end document imaging and uploading, some are assigned to the call centers, others to make sure the mail coming in is sorted and filed, as well as making sure mail is going out to clients in a timely fashion.
4. ***Worker buy in to culture change is crucial.*** When deciding on a new administration type, or changes to a current one, worker buy in is crucial. If workers do not buy in to the changes being made, they will never: A. Give the changes being made a real shot; B. Maximize the changes being made due to the fact they do not see them as what they want; and C. Allow a director or supervisor to carry out changes they think will bring efficiencies and economy to the administration of SNAP and TANF. The interviews suggested that county officials think caseworkers need to have input into in changes being made. Involving caseworkers in these changes also gives employees an opportunity to “bond” as they work together to adopt the new administrative processing systems.

## Chapter V: Conclusions, Limitations, Future Research

### Overall Conclusions

When looking at the differences not only among the three administration types, but the county environments in which they are utilized, we can see that one size does not fit all. Counties were created in order to best serve the people living within that region. Yes this conclusion should not be taken “too far.” There is increasing evidence in the literature that the task-based administration style is more efficient and involved cost savings over the case-based method. The challenge will be to ensure that the social equity aspects of benefits administration will not be undermined by the quest to achieve these economies and efficiencies.

The landscape within a county and resources available to that county will shape the way a county will administer their SNAP benefits. However, the results of this study do suggest that the task-based system is the most efficient of the three systems for administering SNAP. The task-based system, however, seems to be more suitable for counties with the following characteristics: highly-educated population, high number of residents who are eligible for SNAP, ability to finance and provide the training/transition using the new technology, a younger county workforce (see Wailand, 2015 who conducted research on generational attributes among Erie County employees), and an urban (rather than rural) county.

NPM advocates adopting business models in the delivery of public services, but NPM tends to emphasize efficiency and economy over equity. New public service, however, takes into consideration the desires of the citizens. It is not all together clear that client will always *prefer* the case-based system; certainly the literature review suggested the severing of the relationship between caseworker and client upends the historical organization of the client-caseworker relationship. However, with as an increasing number of New Yorkers qualifying for SNAP benefits—and this number is expected to continue to rise as more baby boomers with inadequate pensions retire—NYS counties will need to cut the costs of determining eligibility, monitoring, and recertifying benefits so that more funds will be available for recipients. With NYS responsible for paying one-half of SNAP administrative costs, Albany should (and is) at the forefront of grappling with this challenge. In New York this problem is particularly acute because it is among just ten states that account for more than one-half of all low-income seniors

living in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2009). Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that all Americans who qualify for SNAP and who would otherwise will not have proper nutrition, receive these benefits. The long-standing one-to-one service provided by the case-based method in the “paternalist” approach which characterizes “traditional/Wilsonian” public administration may be increasingly unrealistic, but also unnecessary in light of technological advances in benefits administration.

### **Study Limitations**

There were limitations to this study which may affect the results. One factor that might limit the applicability of the findings is that the study did not have an even number of counties that fall into each different administration style. Of the twelve counties sampled, six of them used a Mixed Methods administration approach. Therefore, the results could have been skewed.

### **Future Research**

Certainly, studying just 12 counties should be seen as a “pilot” and serve as a basis to study all of NYS counties on the dimensions explored in this paper. The next study would also benefit by extending the study to caseworkers, rather than limiting interviewing to county social service directors as in this study. Caseworkers, especially, can explain the various aspects of the mixed methods style, weigh in on how they feel about an eventual demise of the case-based method or for those that are now working in counties with task-based methods, how this has affected their productivity, their feelings about their job, and so forth. Finally, this study did not consider the role of budgets. Future research should include budgetary figures associated with each of the administrative styles so that productivity can be measured in terms of dollar values (rather than just worker productivity as in this study).

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