

12-18-2015

# Hearing Officers' Perceptions of Their Roles in Welfare Organizations

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# Hearing Officers' Perceptions of Their Roles in Welfare Organizations

Karen R. Brown, Ph.D.

University of Connecticut, 2015

Little is known about the officials who conduct administrative hearings for aggrieved welfare clients. Hearing officers are charged with ensuring due process for welfare clients, called appellants in the hearing process, who believe that mistakes have been made in their cases and who wish to challenge those decisions. Administrative hearings are one of the few vehicles that afford clients the opportunity to contest welfare policies and procedures. This study explored welfare hearing officers and their perceptions of their roles in conducting hearings.

The concepts of role theory, organizational climate and aspects of professional training were used to examine the role perceptions of hearing officers. Semi-structured interviews, intended to identify officers' beliefs about their jobs, were conducted with 27 participants who had social services-related degrees. Findings demonstrated that officers strive to be fair and impartial, yet perceive role conflict and ambiguity as a result of several factors related to the players in the hearings process. Findings suggested that organizational climate impacted officers' feelings about their agencies based on constant changes to agency functions. The benefits of professional training and education on officers' roles were examined and will also be explained. The paper concludes with a discussion around the study's findings and concludes with the study's limitations and implications for social work research, practice, and education.

Hearing Officers' Perceptions of Their Roles in Welfare Organizations

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B.A., University of Connecticut, 1989

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A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

at the

University of Connecticut

2015

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2015

APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my loved ones, including my mother Eva for putting up with my mood swings and forever being in my corner, my fiancé Collin for being my rock to lean on, and my friends, my church community, and loving family members for hanging in with me and letting me know that you were right beside me the entire time.

A heartfelt thank you to my committee members Drs. Nancy A. Humphreys, Vicki A. Lens, Louise Simmons, and Cristina M. Wilson for all of your guidance, expertise and support that kept me going during my journey.

To the members and executive Board of the National Association of Hearing Officials (NAHO) for allowing me to gain insight and data about the valuable role of the hearing officer. A special thank you to Andrea Boardman for your invaluable assistance in this effort.

To the wonderful UConn School of Social Work collective of faculty members, staff persons, and fellow students who cheered me on the entire time, a heartfelt thank you. Shout out to Kathy Birnie!

To my favorite “relic” Dr. Alex Gitterman – what can I say? You rock!

To my “cohortee” and yardie Yvonne Patterson, we did this! Bless up for everything!

And last, but not least, my WONDERFUL Dissertation chair Dr. Edna Comer – you walked the plank and the tightrope with me, hugged, yelled, and cheered...I will never forget what you did for me and you are now stuck with me forever. My “thank you” is not enough in consideration for all of your energy and love.

God bless!!!

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my father, the late Noel W. Brown, who always told me that I would be a “head shrinker” and help those in need. I walk on your shoulders.

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## **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH**

This dissertation focuses on welfare hearing officers and their role perceptions in carrying out their jobs. The introductory section will present information in the following manner: a review of welfare administrative hearings and the individuals involved, including: appellants, eligibility workers, and hearing officials, with a particular focus on hearing officers' training, education, and roles.

The welfare administrative hearings or "fair hearings" system was established during the Social Security Act of 1935 to address actions taken on public assistance cases. The system affords clients the opportunity to have case errors corrected and/or resolve any disputes they have about a decision issued by a welfare agency. There are three significant participants in this process: the appellant, who is the client requesting the hearing, the eligibility worker, who is the agency representative presenting the case and the agency's position on an action, and the official, who adjudicates and controls the process.

Of significance to this study is the hearing official, who determines the agency's correctness in the proposed actions and render written decisions that outline their findings and rationale, as supported by relevant laws and policies. There are two types of officials that conduct welfare hearings: administrative law judges (ALJs) and hearing officers. Administrative law judges conduct hearings in almost half of the states in the U.S., while the remaining states utilize hearing officers (Brodoff, 2008). While both officials have different training, education, and salaries, they essentially perform the same role in carrying out hearings. Administrative law judges have law degrees and training in administrative law. The basic requirement for being a

hearing officer is that one must have experience with public assistance programs and at least a bachelor's degree, which is not discipline specific (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Hearing officers also receive some training on administrative law procedures. Hearing officers are paid on average about \$30,000 less than administrative law judges (Indeed.com, 2015).

Hearing officers have social services-related degrees such as psychology, human services, anthropology, and sociology, are employees of the welfare office and have moved into the position of hearing officer from other agency positions, such as eligibility workers and quality control reviewers. Prior to completing the study, the researcher assumed there would be hearing officers with social work degrees since social workers with master's degrees were historically the first type of professionals trained to administer welfare benefits. The research conducted in this study did not find participants with social work degrees.

### **Problem Statement**

Hearing officials conduct welfare hearings to correct agency errors in benefit administration. The research on hearing officials has centered on administrative law judges and their perceptions of fairness and discretion in their role (Asimow, 1999; Brodoff, 2008; Lens, 2012). There is limited research on hearing officers and how they view their roles. This study will focus on how hearing officers view their job responsibilities.

There is greater knowledge about the appellants' perceptions of hearings than about hearing officials' perceptions of their roles. Research literature on administrative welfare hearings include the appellants' perspectives regarding hearings (Handler, 1986; Lens & Vorsanger, 2005; Perales, 1990), the reasons they request hearings (Brodoff, 2008; Lens, 2007, 2012), how they

benefit, and their beliefs about procedural justice and appeal rates (Handler, 1986; Lens & Vorsanger, 2005; Simon, 1990).

Hearing officers are often situated within welfare organizations, or what Watkins-Hayes (2009) calls “catch all bureaucracies”, defined as governmental agencies that are considered “the societal arms of help” where workers are expected to navigate multiple client problems related to economic and social disadvantage. These demands may influence workers’ perceptions of the organization and their ability to carry out job functions. Issues that affect workers include large caseloads coupled with voluminous paperwork and long hours. Other issues that impact workers point to frequent policy changes as mandated by state and federal policy requirements, inadequate training and supervision, and limited resources to serve clients (Hasenfeld, 2010; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). One source suggests that human service work is held in low regard which influences workers’ feelings that their work is not valued (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003). These conjectures have the potential to impact workers’ perspectives about and relationship with the organizations in which they work.

This research examined the role of hearing officers to gain understanding of their perspectives about, and challenges of, adjudicating welfare cases. An initial intent of this study was to focus on hearing officers with human services degrees, including social work. Social work, in particular because social workers are trained and have competencies in observing human behavior in the social environment that allow them to effectively assess, evaluate, and provide appropriate interventions to client situations (CSWE, 2014). Social workers also possess the skills and strategies designed to promote social and economic justice in different settings. However, no social workers were identified from the sampling frame.

The following discussion begins with a historical review of the administrative hearing process and the hearing officer's role in these proceedings. Role theory was utilized as a means of explaining how organizations can influence the actions and behaviors of individuals in their various roles. Organizational climate was used to explain how employees' overall feelings about their organizations impacted their job attitudes. The discussion concludes with examining how education and professional training influenced officers' job perceptions.

### **Welfare Administrative Hearings Overview**

Welfare is defined as the system of public assistance programs administered by government agencies that provides support to needy individuals and families in the form of financial, medical, nutritional, childcare, and daycare benefits (Trattner, 1999). The administrative hearings system in welfare was created to correct errors on client cases and allow clients to resolve disputes between them and the agencies. Clients are afforded the opportunity to contest an agency's actions through the administrative hearings process. Also called "fair hearings", administrative hearings have been established since the Social Security Act of 1935 to address actions taken on public assistance cases.

Initially, the hearings system failed to adequately meet the goals of social justice for which it was intended. Recipients of the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) benefits in New York City, led by plaintiff John Kelly, argued that their benefits were being terminated and they failed to receive notification of their hearing rights and sued the City demanding to receive notices of termination and hearing. In the *Goldberg v. Kelly* (397 US 254 [1970]) ruling, the United States Supreme Court decided that welfare benefits were entitlements, which established welfare payments as a "property right." Once welfare payments were

established as a "property right", the government could not stop payments without due process of the law under the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments of the Constitution (Mashaw, 1997). This ruling gave welfare clients due process of law, or the right to an administrative hearing prior to the termination of their benefits (Simon, 1983). As a result, when an agency takes an adverse action against a welfare client, he or she is entitled to: 1) timely and adequate notice of the action; 2) the opportunity to participate in decision making; 3) an adequate opportunity to defend themselves by questioning witnesses and challenging evidence; 4) representation by counsel; 5) a record of the hearing proceedings and reasons for the adverse action; and 6) an impartial decision-maker (*Goldberg v. Kelly*, 397 US 254). On the same day as the *Goldberg* ruling, in a similar action, *Wheeler v. Montgomery* (397 US 280 [1970]), the Court ruled that states were entitled to provide clients with at least three days' notice prior to the effective date of the proposed discontinuance or suspension of benefits, along with reasons for the intended action and a statement of what option or action(s) is required to reestablish eligibility. In addition, the recipient may meet with the caseworker before benefits are terminated to discuss the issues for purposes of clarification, resolution, or restoration of benefits. This precedent was prompted by Old Age Assistance recipients in California who were denied benefit termination rights (Davis, 1995). This gave *Goldberg* more "teeth" and further strengthened welfare clients' due process rights. Although administrative hearings have been part of the welfare system since the Social Security Act of 1935, *Goldberg* strengthened the clients' ability to receive timely notice of benefit termination and the right to appeal decisions prior to the termination of benefits.

The hearings process allows clients to challenge the interpretation of welfare policy and it is one of the few mechanisms that encourage clients to actively participate in the welfare bureaucratic process (Lens, 2005). Clients may appeal a determination, denial, discontinuance,

suspension, or a reduction in their benefits, and in some cases, a policy change that affects a benefit. Administrative hearings are informal, quasi-judicial proceedings that were originally designed to protect clients from arbitrary and illegal government action by correcting agency errors (Handler, 1986).

The number of hearing requests has increased dramatically over time. For example, Perales (1990) reported that in the State of New York, there were 1,300 appeals filed in 1969, and 20 years later, that number increased to 150,000. Also, in 2007 in the state of New York, where over one million households rely solely or in part upon public cash assistance or food stamps, the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance received over 200,000 hearing requests (Loffredo & Friedman, 2009). In contrast, in Connecticut, while the data for appeal rates from 1969 and 1989 were not available, in 2007, with over 200,000 public assistance recipients, it received about 10,335 hearing requests (Personal Communication, Department of Social Services Administrative Hearings Unit Data, April 2014).

Although the hearings process allows clients to contest agency actions, it is underutilized. Findings from welfare hearing studies suggest that clients failed to appeal adverse decisions because they were unaware of their right to appeal (Handler, 1986). A study by Lens (2009) purported that clients' willingness to appeal decisions were based on their perceptions of the agency, perceptions about negative treatment by workers, the influence of clients' social networks, and the stigma associated with welfare benefit receipt. The hearings process may be underutilized for other reasons, such as perceptions of negative office environments that discourage clients and render them powerless (Abramovitz, 2001; Handler, 1986; Hasenfeld, 2000; Hasenfeld, 2010; Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001). Welfare clients, disproportionately poor women of color, have intersecting circumstances that render them powerless in the systems



designed to help them, such as gender, race, or socioeconomic status (Williams Crenshaw, 1997; Hancock, 2003; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). The hearings process has also been criticized as being fundamentally unfair to clients because they are often at a disadvantage in the system (Brohoff, 2008). Handler (1986) argues that clients fail to challenge agencies because they are unaware that they can appeal, and notices issued to clients about case actions are often confusing. Other explanations include client barriers such as language, education, physical, and mental disabilities (Loffredo & Friedman, 2009). Additionally, welfare environments discourage clients and render them powerless (Abramovitz, 1996; Handler, 1986; Hasenfeld, 1995, 2010; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001). Clients have many obstacles that prevent them from making use of this process. Kaufman (2005) however, in her article addressing whether due process protections actually protect poor persons of color in a federalist system posits that “... procedural due process... offers an important check on state and local discretion, with the potential of stemming race discrimination and consistent with the protections envisioned by a dual federalist system” (p. 32). More often than not, clients are overwhelmed and intimidated by the hearings process and have concerns about retribution from their workers (Handler, 1986) and a sense of powerlessness regarding the welfare bureaucracy (Hasenfeld, 1996; Shram, Soss, Fording, & Houser, 2009).

**hearing structure.** There are two types of administrative hearing structures: a central panel or an agency-housed hearing unit. In a central panel, administrative law judges (ALJs) are hired or appointed by state governments and housed in a separate location from the agency from which they conduct the welfare hearings (Simon, 1990). The ALJs conduct hearings on behalf of state agencies and may deal with issues such as unemployment, education, motor vehicles or insurance, as well as welfare hearings; the types of hearings they conduct varies across states.

They are given a certain level of independence from the agencies for which they conduct hearings because they are in their own agency, such as an Office of Administrative Hearings as authorized through the legislative process. This also allows them to conduct hearings for multiple state agencies (Hoberg, 1994).

In contrast, hearing officers are hired by and housed within the same agency for which they conduct hearings (Brodoff, 2008). They may conduct hearings on issues such as Medicaid, Food Stamps/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, temporary family assistance (TFA), child support, foster care subsidies, or daycare assistance. Officers are usually situated in their own units within the agency. The mode in which hearings are conducted vary by state and officers may hold hearings in person, over the telephone, or by videoconference.

Almost half of the states in the US operate with the central panel system and the remaining states utilize hearing officers that can be found within agency-based hearings systems (Brodoff, 2010).

**appellants.** Appellants are the clients that request hearings or appeals. An appellant may be an applicant requesting benefits, or an active recipient whose benefits were recently changed or terminated. Once an action is taken on an appellant's case, the welfare agency provides them with a written notice of the action with an attached hearing request form that explains their appeal rights and information on how to request a hearing. Appellants request hearings for programs such as food stamps, Medicaid, TANF, and rental, child support, cash or daycare assistance (Loffredo and Friedman, 2009). Everyone has the right to request a hearing, but some requests are denied, usually because they were not filed in a timely manner or when the agency does not have the jurisdiction, or authority under state statutes to rule on a particular issue. For example, an appellant may mistakenly request a hearing on an issue related to their Social Security benefits and state agencies do not conduct Social Security hearings.

When a request is granted, appellants are provided a written notice that includes the date, time, hearing issue, and the name of the hearing officer. They are informed that they have the right to examine case records and receive copies of all the evidence that the agency will submit for the hearing. The appellants have the right to legal counsel. The majority of appellants attend pro se, ~~or~~ without representation, or choose to represent themselves (Lens, 2007). They may not have the resources to secure legal counsel (Brohoff, 2008). When requested, Legal Aid Services has been the primary legal representative for welfare clients seeking to address benefit changes or denials at both the department and court levels (Brohoff, 2008; Lens, 2007). Unfortunately, because of federal funding cuts to provide civil legal services to low-income persons, appellants are often left without representation in the hearings process (Brohoff, 2010, p. 604). Appellants who have financial resources may hire private counsel to represent them. Some hearings may have anywhere from one to eight or more attorneys present, where one attorney represents the appellant, another the agency, and the others have an interest in the appellant's successful appeal, such as an attorney representing a nursing home or hospital where the entities stand to get compensation if the appellant wins. In some Medicaid hearings where the appellant is in a nursing facility, the appellant or family may hire private attorneys to represent them at hearings when agencies determine that they have improperly transferred assets in order to qualify for Medicaid, such as giving away cash and homes as "gifts", selling homes below fair market value, or transferring cash into fixed annuities so that the money is considered "unavailable".

Additionally, the Administrative Procedure Act of 1946 (5 USC § 556) allows the appellant to bring along a friend, relative, or other personal spokesperson for support at the hearing. Some may even bring advocates from outside agencies to speak on their behalf. Accommodations for disabilities as well as language and deaf interpretation services are provided for appellants that

indicate a need in accordance with federal and state laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990.

The research suggests that when clients do request and attend hearings, most of the time decisions are made in their favor. In a study done by Lens and Vorsanger (2005) on appeal rates after welfare reform, Texas clients appealing work-related Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) decisions won 53 percent of the time, while similar appeals in New York City were successful 81 percent of the time. These findings suggest that despite the barriers that prevent clients from requesting hearings, it is beneficial for them to utilize this process because the system can work to their advantage.

**agency staff.** The agency staff are the representatives that appear at the hearings and presents the agency's position. Agency staff are usually eligibility or investigations workers, or their supervisors involved in taking the action on a case (Hagen, 2015) and sometimes are other employees that the agency designates to represent it at the hearings. The staff person prepares a summary for the hearing, which is a detailed account of the steps taken and the case determination by the agency. The summary is supplemented with supporting written documents, called evidence, including the applicable federal or state statute, policy, or regulation to support its rationale (Hagen, 2015). Other documents may include the department's computer calculation screen printouts, copies of the appellant's information such as documentation of employment, living arrangements, and medical conditions. These are usually items that the appellant submitted for an eligibility determination or documents secured by the agency from other sources in this process. The staff person has the responsibility of defending the agency's actions and in this position they might take on an adversarial role against the appellant. In certain instances, an

agency attorney may be present at a hearing to support its position in eligibility determinations that involve complex legal matters such as handling trusts or annuities.

**hearing officers.** The criteria for being a hearing officer are that they have at least a bachelor's degree and prior experience working with welfare programs. Approximately 23 states, including Connecticut, South Carolina, and Texas, hire hearing officers who have a bachelor's degree, prior agency experience, and expertise in departmental policy and procedures (onenetonline.com, 2014). Some states require candidates to pass a competitive examination to qualify for the position, and are interviewed before being hired. Databases (EBSCOhost, JSTOR, LexisNexis, PsychINFO, Social Services Abstract, and Springerlink) that were reviewed did not provide information that identified what educational degrees officers need to possess. Hearing officers are generally employed by and work within the same agency administering the welfare hearings (Arzt, 2003; Brodoff, 2008).

**training.** Newly hired hearing officers receive training prior to conducting hearings. This is done in-house or at an outside location. In-house training may involve shadowing a colleague, or attending training sessions on administrative procedure or departmental policies. The length of training may take place from three days to three weeks (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

Hearing officers may receive training from organizations such as the National Association of Hearing Officials (NAHO) or the National Judicial College on topics such as understanding due process, evidence review, credibility judgments, conflict resolution, mediation and practicing effective bench skills (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; National Association of Hearing Officials, 2015). Additionally, training is available in managing difficult hearings. For example, there is a NAHO workshop conducted by Judge Jim Gerl, an administrative law judge

and special education consultant on “Managing Difficult Lawyers and Pro Se Hearing Participants” which provides techniques to use when encountering hostile parties in hearings and strategies to maintain control and professional demeanor (NAHO, 2015).

**education.** Individuals that meet the qualifications for hearing positions are those with a combination of a bachelor’s degree and at least five to seven years of agency experience, such as determining eligibility, managing a case load, or conducting fraud investigations. The criterion of prior welfare eligibility experience may vary across states. For example, in Connecticut and Missouri, hearing officers are required to have at least 4 years of experience in a social services program area with at least one year in a supervisory or consultative capacity. A bachelor’s degree in a social services area with at least 2 years of relevant social services experience is acceptable in lieu of the direct work experience (Missouri Office of Administration, 2014; Personal Communication, CT Department of Social Services fair hearings officer job classification, 2014).

Graduate degrees are not required for the job but it stands to reason that higher educational achievement increases the chances that individuals will have greater skill levels or expertise than those with just a bachelor’s degree. In social work, for example, a person with an MSW may have greater competencies in assessment and treatment of individuals who are coping with a number of adverse life conditions than a bachelor’s level social worker. Advanced skills prepare workers to use techniques that acknowledge clients’ rights, engage them in democratic decision-making and conflict management that can be used to empower clients and engage them in the process of being advocates for social justice (Pandya, 2005, p. 605).

**roles.** Hearing officers must stay abreast and adapt to policy, law, and procedure changes as well as agency transitions to ensure clients’ benefit rights. Like front line workers who mediate between clients’ needs and agency resources (Dressel & Lipsky, 1989), hearing

officers operate within a similar paradigm, where they are expected to adjudicate between clients and agency employees. At the same time, they are different from front line workers because they hold higher-paying and higher-status positions and have greater discretionary power in benefit determinations. Hearing officers are afforded greater autonomy in decision-making and can reverse agency actions. Hearing officers sit at the intersection of eligibility determination, rules, and discretion, having to both review eligibility determinations and interpret policy, which is not always clear-cut or fit all circumstances. This uniquely situated bureaucrat carries the burden of making decisions that impact clients' lives and at the same time critiquing the agency where he or she is employed (Lens, 2005). Carrying out both roles may cause conflict on the officers because of the position it places the officer in of being the "judge and jury" and that someone will be disappointed by the ruling.

In addition to listening to testimony and gathering facts during hearings, officers are expected to control the hearings and manage the behavior of those participating, including frustrated appellants and their support persons, legal representatives, and eligibility workers (Welfare Rights Organizing Coalition, 2012). Though hearing officers render decisions utilizing state and federal laws, both the worker and the appellant are sometimes dissatisfied with the ruling. To summarize, hearing officers are expected to juggle various tasks with a number of people who have different expectations of how they should perform their responsibilities. Given the complexities of the hearing process, it may be beneficial to have graduate level social workers who are trained as hearing officers. Social workers have competencies in helping individuals manage dilemmas that occur in their lives, which are often intertwined with legal processes. The benefit of understanding the perspectives of hearing officers who have social services degrees would enhance the magnitude of this process.

**Summary**

This chapter introduced the welfare hearings process, the key players involved, and the role of the welfare hearing officer in relation to helping aggrieved clients seek justice in securing public assistance benefits. Hearing officers are uniquely situated between the cries of clients seeking help and the eligibility workers that implement restrictive welfare policies. This juxtaposition of agency policy versus client needs places divergent expectations on the hearing officers' role, which may cause them to experience role conflict or ambiguity. Yet there is limited documentation in the research databases about welfare hearings officers and how they see their roles.



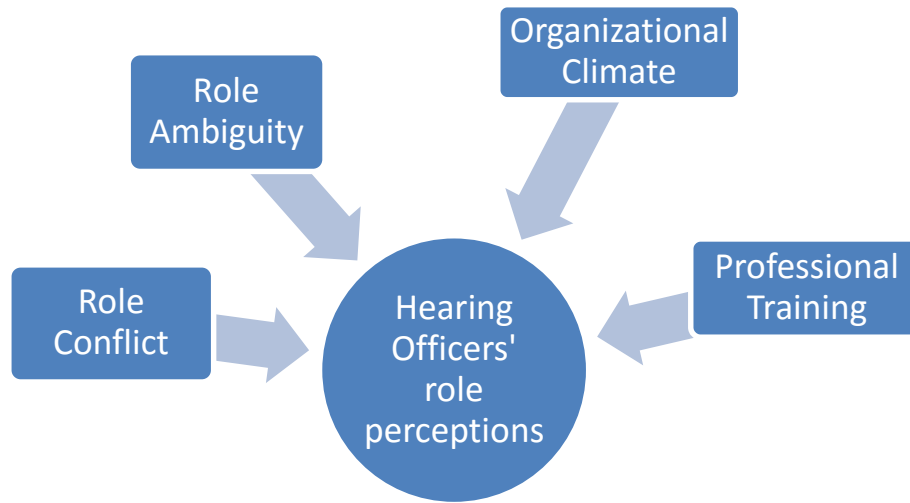
## **Chapter One**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

One theory and two key elements guided this study: role theory, organizational climate, and professional training. Historically, role theory was developed to explain workplace behavior. Role theory posits that the workplace defines an employee's role and suggests that the behaviors are based on both organizational and individual norms. Two concepts of role theory are conflict and ambiguity. When expectations of employee roles clash with one another, it may create conflict. Likewise, when employees lack clarity about what is expected of them, they feel unclear, or ambiguous about their roles and how to perform in them. Organizational climate refers to an employee's overall perception about their workplace and how those beliefs influence their workplace behavior. Professional training is the special knowledge and skills one receives for their line of work. The results from this study may deepen understanding of these welfare employees and the roles they play in their jobs. The application of this conceptual framework can help to increase the understanding of hearing officers' perceptions of their roles within welfare agencies and how their insight influences feelings about and behaviors on the job.

Figure 1

*Study conceptual framework*



### Conceptual Framework

**role theory.** Role theory helps to explain how roles, and their associated behaviors, are shaped by organizations, and how expectations from the organization and various sources may impact these. Organizations recruit and select employees and assign them to roles based on education, training, and professional experiences. Roles are “specific forms of behavior associated with given positions which develop originally from task requirements” (Katz & Kahn, 1966). Roles provide a function for employees to participate in an organization’s daily activities and outline how the employee carries out this function. Giddens (1979) explained that roles are involved in actions, and the norms of the organization govern these actions.

Biddle (1986) posited that humans behave in different and predictable ways, depending on their respective social identities and situations. Roles are important in social structure and have been recognized as central to understanding employee behavior in organizations (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Role theory suggests that a reciprocal relationship between individuals and social

institutions and role relationships are based on social structures (Goode, 1960; Stryker & Macke, 1978). In essence, how employees perform in roles are a function of both the worker and the organization.

Organizations select individuals for particular roles and define the norms for these. People accept roles because they provide important psychological benefits such as status, ego gratification, and self-esteem (Williams & Alliger, 1994). However, when there are multiple roles within one job that compete with each other, it causes stress and conflict. These stressors are caused by the pressures from the organization in how employees do their jobs, and the constraints place upon them (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Role theory suggests that organizational factors generate expectations among employees, which results in them feeling pressured.

Within the role theory knowledge base, there are two commonly identified stressors associated with roles, which are conflict and ambiguity. Role conflict is when a person experiences contradictory expectations within a single job. Role ambiguity is when one experiences unclear expectations about performance for a specific job. The literature on role theory suggests that conflict and ambiguity are sources of job stress or strain within organizations (Kahn & Quinn, 1970; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984).

**role conflict.** Role conflict is defined as competing demands and requirements within a job (Ashforth & Lee, 1990; Ivancevich & Matteson, 1980; Katz & Kahn, 1967; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Role conflict occurs when compliance with expectations embedded in one message clash with demands implicit in other messages (Katz & Kahn, 1966). For example, during welfare reform in 1996, income maintenance workers experienced conflicts in their jobs

because of the demand for them to increase their responsibilities for which they were unprepared. They now had to help clients achieve self-sufficiency through services such as gaining employment, job training, and addressing domestic violence issues. If the clients did not carry out these functions successfully, they would be sanctioned and lose their benefits. In the words of Lawrence Mead, they had to both “help and hassle” recipients to follow mandates to get them off the welfare rolls (1997). Workers wanted to help but these policies influenced the manner in which help was offered, causing strained relationships between them and the clients. These findings were consistent with prior research around stress on frontline workers related to increased job responsibilities (Giddens, 1979; Hasenfeld, 2010; Lipsky, 1980).

Role conflict is intense in jobs that require abstract thinking and decision making (Lipsky, 1980; Menon & Akhilesh, 1994). For example, police officers, teachers, and social workers have to see things beyond the obvious and pick up on body language and non-verbal communication in detecting underlying causes of presenting problems in emergency situations. Role conflict has been conceptualized through terms like job stress, organizational stress, role stress, job tension, and role strain (Gilboa, Shirom, & Fried, 2005; Goode, 1960; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Mor-Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Ortqvist & Wincent, 2006; Schuler, 1982; Tracy & Johnson, 1981). Research on role theory has mainly focused on conflict and ambiguity as sources of stress in organizations, though some of the data suggests that the stress comes from the social system or environment (Jex & Beehr, 1991) where agencies expect outcomes that may or may not be achievable (Barling, Kelloway, & Frone, 2005).

Similar to front-line eligibility staff who experience conflict because of competing demands (Acker & Lawrence, 2009; Maslach, 1986), hearing officers feel tension because each party involved in the hearing process expects a ruling in their favor. They may have pressures

because they hold higher-paying positions with greater responsibilities than eligibility workers, and have discretionary power in determining benefits. While hearing officers are not considered managers, they often act as consultants, because they may direct individuals on how to navigate the welfare bureaucracy (Lens, 2007a). Such action implies that officers are expected to understand the policies and have the ability to apply these correctly across various social programs and contexts. Yet officers might not clearly understand how these policies apply across all program areas because they have not worked in or are not familiar with every service area in which a policy is applicable. For example, an officer may have prior work experience with the Food Stamp program but was never exposed to child support or Medicaid cases or policy. Welfare agencies often assign their eligibility staff to program-specific units where they only manage a limited policy scope or function, like a Food Stamp unit, a Medicaid unit, or an intake processing unit.

**role ambiguity.** Role ambiguity occurs when people are unclear or uncertain about expectations associated with a particular role in their workplace (Edmondson, 2002; Ivancevich & Matteson, 1980; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Role ambiguity can happen when there is a lack of clarity regarding the responsibilities or goals of one's position, and the requirements or methods to complete the tasks. An example of this is the nervousness a social work intern may experience in their field placement when they have to respond to a client crisis for which they are unfamiliar with and the field instructor is unavailable to advise them on how to properly handle the situation. They feel angst and uncertainty because although their instincts and training may direct them to respond in one way, they lack experience in handling a particular situation and do not want to cause harm.

Role ambiguity has been associated with dissatisfaction, isolation, as well as job tension, and propensity to leave the job (Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Rizzo et al., 1970; Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler 1981). Feelings of ambiguity have been linked to low job satisfaction and decreased performance. If employees are uncertain about role expectations, they hesitate to make decisions and may resort to trial and error process (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970), experience dissatisfaction, anxiety, reality distortions, and “thus perform less effectively” (p. 69) .Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler (1981) suggest that if employees do not know what is expected of them, they may be working on the wrong things. Welfare agencies strive for efficiency in managing caseloads so ambiguity is an important concept to consider when thinking of staff performance. If agency staff feels uncertain about what their roles are, they are not likely able to help clients because of lack of clarity.

**organizational climate.** Organizations influence employees’ perceptions and behavior. Organizational climate is the shared beliefs among members about the environment in which they work, to which they attach psychological meaning in order to make sense of it (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000; Glisson, 2002; James & James, 1989; James & Jones, 1974; Schneider, 1975). Organizational climate is frequently used as a variable because of its importance in understanding individual behavior in the workforce (Litwin & Stringer, 1968; Phipps, Franklin, & Sharma, 2013; Sarkar, 2013), and some of the research about this concept has been focused on worker attitudes in different job sectors, including government agencies and schools (Chang, Chuang, & Bennington, 2011; Glisson, 2007; Hassan & Rourbaugh, 2012; Solomon, 1986). Although people work collectively in organizations, their behavior and perceptions are based upon individual factors. Employees may share similar beliefs about the organization but there’s variation among their personal perceptions, and the variance provides

meaningful information about the strength of the organization's climate (Aarons & Sawitzky, 2006; Lindell & Brandt, 2000; Schneider, Salvaggio, & Subirats, 2002). For example, welfare organizations are regarded as complicated spaces where clients negotiate massive needs with limited resources. Workers who are juggling agency and client demands are more likely to be dissatisfied with the job, experience burnout, and depersonalize clients such as detaching from them (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Maslach, 1980; Mor-Barak, 2005).

The literature supports the importance of organizational climate in measuring the effectiveness and efficiency of organizations (Mayer & Schoorman, 1998; Ostroff & Schmitt, 1993; Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013). The impact of employee attitudes on work performance has been the focus of a number of studies over the last few decades (James and Jones 1980; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Payne & Pugh, 1976; Schneider, 1975). These data suggest that employee attitudes about their work environment are important determinants of the organization's effectiveness. For example, a positive attitude is often linked to increased productivity and job satisfaction (Miller & Monge, 1986). Examining organizational climate in the context of human services work is relevant because it has been connected to perceptions of customer service quality, efficiency, and performance (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Schneider et al., 2002), all desired goals of welfare agencies.

Watkins-Hayes' (2009) research on frontline welfare workers found that their professional identities are formed by the organization and its climate. In addition, the author posits that professional identities are a marriage of the job environment and personal factors. When employees work for an organization, they are not simply responding to the work environment; they bring their own personal characteristics to the position, such as age, education,

life and prior work experiences (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). These factors influence how employees respond in their work environments.

In sum, organizational climate is a combination of an organization's influence on an employee and their personal characteristics that help contribute to their beliefs about their workplace. Organizational climate can influence workers' attitudes and behaviors on the job, which is of importance to organizations concerned with efficient operations and positive customer outcomes, like welfare agencies.

**professional training.** Training is a systematic approach to learning and development to improve individual, team, and organizational effectiveness on the job (Goldstein & Ford, 2002). Training is believed to benefit both employees and employers and has been linked to increased job performance, uniformity of procedures, the need for less supervision, and higher morale. Yet, Larson and Hewitt (2012) suggest that often orientation in human services organizations translates into about a week's worth of classroom training on mandatory topics and then employees are sent out into the workforce with little to no support. This is generally the training offered to employees of welfare organizations. New employees are often provided with policy and procedural manuals to read for a week or so and then they are placed into their jobs and expected to implement policy. Yet it has been suggested that it can take 6–12 months to fully socialize an employee to a new job (Hutchins, 2000; Larson, Lakin, & Bruininks, 1998). If employees are not properly trained on their job tasks, they may not exercise their full capacity to perform and the overall efficiency of the organization decreases. In summary, training is an important factor to consider in an employee's ability to maximize their skills in being efficient and performing well.



## **Research Questions**

Since little is known about welfare hearing officers and their role perceptions, this study used qualitative methods to gain deeper information about their feelings. The following six questions led the inquiry:

Question #1: What are hearing officers' beliefs about their agencies?

Question #2: Do hearing officers perceive conflict in carrying out their jobs?

Question #3: Do hearing officers perceive ambiguity in carrying out their jobs?

Question #4: How does organizational climate influence their job perceptions?

Question #5: How does education and training influence their job perceptions?

Question #6: Are there other elements that influence their job perceptions?

These questions lent themselves to exploring hearing officers' perceptions of themselves within the context of their jobs. The questions were examined by gathering information from hearing officers through the use of semi-structured interviews that included collecting responses and demographics.

## **Summary**

In this study, role theory and its components conflict and ambiguity, and the concepts of organizational climate and professional training were used to help explain hearing officers' perceptions about their jobs. This framework was selected because the theory and concepts help to explain employee attitudes and perceptions about their jobs and how elements of the

workplace may impact their beliefs. The next section will detail the steps that used to carry out the study.

## **Chapter Two**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This chapter describes the research methodology used in this study, where the following information is presented: research design and rationale; the sampling methods; the researcher's role; the instrument; data collection; data management; data analysis; the rigor used in the study to address validity and reliability; and ethical considerations.

#### **Design and Rationale**

Exploratory research was conducted using qualitative methods to inquire about hearing officers' thoughts about the four primary areas of the study: role conflict, role ambiguity, organizational climate, and professional training. Qualitative methods were employed by conducting semi-structured interviews with participants, over the telephone and in person. This process allowed the researcher to gather demographic information and to explore different areas about their jobs by asking questions to gain deeper meaning. The IBM SPSS program (version 22), a commonly used analytic software program, was used to manage and analyze the demographic information and QSR NVivo (version 10), a qualitative data analysis program, was used to manage and analyze the interview data. Grounded theory was used to analyze the results.

One uses exploratory studies when a problem is not clearly defined to address research questions or when the topic is new and data on it is difficult to obtain. Exploratory research was conducted in this study because little is known about welfare hearing officers, the target population (Rubin & Babbie, 2011), and what concepts could be used to address the research questions (Yegidis & Weinbach, 2011). Qualitative methods facilitate ways to gather more in-

depth insight into participant attitudes, thoughts, and actions (Kendall, 2008). The qualitative method of semi-structured interviews was used in this study. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to develop focused questions ahead of time in order to investigate complex information and fill a gap in knowledge that other methods cannot effectively gain (Padgett, 2008). These type of interviews allow the researcher to standardize some of the questions, which increases the reliability of the data. Semi-structured interviews are also valuable in allowing the researcher to use probes in asking questions, to get more details, to help participants recall details around particular events and to increase the reliability of data by exploring and clarifying inconsistencies within participants' responses (Kadushin & Kadushin, 1997).

Using grounded theory to analyze the interview data was essential in examining the hearing officers' beliefs by allowing the researcher to explore and identify sensitive concepts and recurrent themes (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory is used in the generation of hypotheses rather than to test them (Yegidis & Weinback, 2009). Since there is a paucity of information about hearing officers, grounded theory research is an appropriate way to acquire the kinds of knowledge needed to lay the groundwork for future research on hearing officers and their job experiences.

The IBM SPSS Program is a commonly used statistical analysis software program for looking at and analyzing descriptive data, particularly in educational research because of its user-friendliness and its capacity to conduct many types of analyses (Muijs, 2010). QSR NVivo is a comprehensive qualitative data analysis software program that is commonly used to organize qualitative data, such as interviews. When used in concert, both software programs allow one to analyze interview data in several ways.

## Qualitative Methods/Data Collection

### **sampling.**

*participants.* The current research study was designed to explore welfare hearing officers and their role perceptions. The sampling frame included 302 members of the National Association of Hearing Officials (NAHO) who were either currently employed or retired, located throughout the United States and the US Virgin Islands (NAHO, 2014). The NAHO was founded in 1986 to provide continuing education, advocacy, and networking resources to administrative hearing officials. It is one of three organizations that provide support and training to administrative hearing officials, including the National Judicial College and the National Association of Administrative Law Judges. Membership in NAHO is voluntary and there is a membership fee. The NAHO executive board granted the researcher permission to utilize the membership database for the study (Appendix B). Participation was open to hearing officers of any age or gender and participants met three inclusion criteria:

1. Hearing officers who conduct welfare or public assistance hearings (i.e. Food Stamps/SNAP, Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), child support, etc.);
2. Hearing officers who are currently employed; and
3. Hearing officers with a social services-related undergraduate or graduate degree (i.e. Anthropology, Criminology, Human Services, Human Development and Family Studies, Psychology, Public Policy, Sociology, Social Work, etc.)

**recruitment.** Convenience and snowball sampling strategies were utilized to recruit participants. Convenience sampling is when participants are selected based on being easily accessible (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). Snowball sampling is when enrolled research participants recruit others to participate (Yegidis & Weinbach, 2011). Snowball sampling is one of the most effective methods for recruiting study participants among populations that may be hard to reach (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). These strategies were complementary to this study since the NAHO membership has hearing officers, the researcher is ~~also~~ a member, and the organization was supportive of the study and allowed the use of the membership database. The organization was also interested in the study's findings. Because of these factors, the researcher could solicit study participants from NAHO memberships and then reach out to these persons to find other welfare hearing officers who might be eligible and willing to take part in the study.

There were several steps executed in the recruitment process. First, the researcher completed the Collaborative IRB Training Initiative (CITI) and received approval from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study (Appendix A). Twenty-two of the members from the database were identified as retired or not conducting welfare hearings. Next, an initial email was sent to 280 members to inform them of the upcoming study (Appendix D). Additionally, an advertisement was placed in the NAHO quarterly newsletter (Appendix E). Information included eligibility for participation in the study and the researcher's contact number and email. Individuals who responded and wanted to know more about the study and those who indicated interest were screened to determine appropriateness. This screening occurred by asking them if (1) they were currently employed as hearing officers; (2) if they conducted welfare or public assistance hearings; and (3) if they had a social work or social services-related undergraduate or graduate degree (Anthropology, Criminology, Family Studies, Human

Development, Human Services, Psychology, Public Policy, Sociology, Social Work).

Approximately 16%, or 44 emails were returned as “undeliverable” and approximately 18%, or 51 individuals responded by email that they were ineligible to participate in the study. About 61%, or 170 persons did not respond to the first email. Fifteen of the 280 individuals who were contacted responded and were screened for eligibility; eleven people, or 4 % were deemed eligible to participate in the study. From these eleven respondents, 2 additional names were provided.

Second, the membership roster was reviewed and compared to those who already responded. The roster was viewed for titles and almost 10 % who did not respond were believed to be hearing officers. Following that, a query was done to identify hearing officers by title from the membership and a list of 27 persons was compiled. About two weeks later, an introductory email was sent to the 27 persons including eligibility for participation in the study and the researcher’s contact information (Appendix F). From this emailing, two emails, or 7% were returned as “undeliverable” and six responded, or 22%. After screening for eligibility to participate, 4, or almost 15 % were eligible and agreed to participate. From these respondents, one referral was provided.

In the third step, follow-up phone calls (Appendix C) were made to the remaining 19 individuals from this list who did not respond. As a result, two persons responded and were eligible to participate; from these respondents, one referral was provided. Approximately 17 individuals, or 63% of the 27 individuals did not respond to emails or phone calls. At each step, individuals were asked to provide the researcher’s contact information to hearing officers they may know of whom may be interested in participating in the study.

Lastly, the researcher attended the NAHO annual training conference in November 2014 in Charleston, South Carolina and requested and was granted permission to solicit participants for the study. Two hearing officers were recruited and agreed to participate on-site. A significant event in the recruiting process was when an administrative law judge attending the conference indicated interest in the study. Though not eligible, he provided his email address and identified hearing officers from his state who might be interested in participating. As a result, seven inquiries were received about the study, and of those, six participants were eligible and agreed to participate in the study.

In summary, 173 of the 280 individuals from the NAHO membership roster did not respond to the study solicitation. A total of 23 individuals responded, resulting in 18 interviews. From these 18 individuals, 3 referrals were provided as a result of snowballing. They were all eligible and consented to participate, totaling 21 interviews. Soliciting hearing officers at the annual NAHO conference resulted in two interviews on site, including a referral that led to 6 interviews. The National Association of Hearing Officials' members were interested in the study and had a willingness to inform others who they felt may meet criteria about the study. The use of snowball sampling for this study was extremely effective and resulted in the researcher securing 9 interviews, representing a third of the total sample. In total, there were 27 that agreed to and were eligible to participate, all of which were interviewed.

***consent.*** At the time of the interview appointments, verbal informed consent was obtained prior to conducting interviews (Appendix G). For telephone participants, they were told the purpose of the research, expectations of participants, expected risks and benefits, that their participation is voluntary, how confidentiality will be handled, and given the researcher's contact information for questions about the research. A written verbal consent agreement was



maintained for each participant (Appendix H). For face-to-face participants, the consent process was explained except that they were provided a form that included the information about consent, they read and signed it, and the forms were stored with the others in a locked file cabinet at the school.

*interviews.* The semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants during the timeframe of September 2014 through December 2014. Nineteen interviews were done over the telephone and eight in person, including two conducted at the NAHO annual conference in November 2014 in Charleston, SC. Of the eight in-person interviews, six were colleagues of the researcher who responded to the emailed solicitation using the NAHO database and only acknowledged to her that they received the email and wanted to participate in the study. The literature posits that there are no significant differences between telephone and face-to-face interviews or evidence to suggest misinterpretation in either mode (Novick, 2008; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004). However, face-to-face interviews are preferable because of the ability to capture synchronous information in time and place, so it is valuable in capturing social cues, such as intonation, body language and facial expressions that provides the interviewer with additional information that can be added to the question responses as well as establishing rapport (Padgett, 2008). While telephone interviews was not the preferred mode, in this situation it was more practical because the participants lived in different states across the country.

As this is a qualitative study, the exact number of interviews needed could not be determined a priori, so the researcher conducted interviews until theoretical saturation was attained (Padgett, 2008), where no new themes emerged. This resulted in the completion of 27 interviews. Memos, in the form of notes from the field journal were kept from each interview for later reflection on ideas and thoughts that occurred to the researcher while interviews were taking

place to refresh her memory. The telephone interviews were conducted in the researcher's home in a private office over a speaker phone so that the data could be recorded. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in a private, secure office at the researcher's workplace. The two interviews at the NAHO Conference were conducted in a vacant, secured workshop room.

*incentives.* Once eligibility was established, interviews were conducted, some immediately; others were scheduled for a later time. As an expression of appreciation, participants were provided a \$15.00 gift card to either Dunkin' Donuts or Starbucks Coffee. Face-to-face participants were given their cards immediately following interview completion and the phone participants were mailed their gift cards within 24 hours of the interview. There were four participants that declined gift cards, one of which declined because of their organizational policy against receiving gifts. A total of 23 gift cards were distributed.

### **The Researcher's Role**

As expected in qualitative research, the researcher was the primary tool of data collection and analysis (Yegedis & Weinbach, 2011). The researcher is currently a welfare hearing officer and has worked in that capacity for the last nine years. The researcher believes that because of her professional connection to the sample, she had some understanding of their role, which helped her establish trust among participants to promote truth telling (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). This makes her an "insider", a member of the population being studied. This status helped her establish rapport quicker with respondents and increased her ability to effectively communicate with the participants (Labaree, 2002). The researcher had to constantly be aware of the methodological and ethical dilemmas associated with being an insider around bias, and allowed the participants to speak freely without interjecting or "filling in the blanks"

when there were pauses. To enhance capacities for being objective, she maintained regular check-ins with her dissertation chair and some committee members to process gut level feelings that emerged from the interviews. In addition, extensive notes were kept in a field journal to document feelings, memories, and ideas as they emerged while data was being collected.

### **Subjectivity**

Because the researcher is an “insider”, she brings a level of subjectivity to the research and understands the participants’ experiences more than someone unfamiliar with the population (Rubin & Babbie, 2011). This allowed the researcher to use her own experiences and reflections as a hearing officer to uncover new information from the data to find new areas of meaning where she can develop some objectivity. On the other hand, the researcher constantly practiced reflexivity, or being self-aware of her analysis and interpretation of the data, to keep objectivity, be ethical and accountable in what and how questions were asked, and how information was received (Krysik & Finn, 2013).

### **Rigor**

The purpose of rigor is to maintain the accuracy of the research by ensuring appropriate collection and analysis of the data, thereby revealing the participants’ true experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The concept of rigor has been hotly debated with respect to qualitative research because of its interpretive and naturalistic nature; nonetheless, it is important to maintain validity and reliability in this type of research. The methodological rigor in this study was addressed by establishing data accuracy or credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

The data was analyzed through an iterative process of data collection and data analysis to interpret and make sense of it (Lichtman, 2014). Credibility or truth telling was enhanced throughout the research process by listening to the recordings, typing the data verbatim, and

rechecking recordings for accuracy. To encourage participants to answer questions honestly and to reduce the chances of their being pressured to provide socially desirable responses (Rubin & Babbie, 2010), the researcher reminded them throughout the interviews that there were no right or wrong answers.

Dependability is when a study's findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher worked towards this by examining the feedback from the pilot study with the two participants regarding the compatibility of the understanding of the questions, how they related to the jobs, and if they meet my expectations.

Transferability measures how well the study results can be generalized to another population (Polit & Beck, 2012). To increase the transferability of the findings, thick, or detailed descriptions were provided that included the settings and situations where the participants carry out hearings. To provide salience regarding welfare hearing officers' experiences, their unique experiences lays the groundwork that can be used in future studies.

Finally, Confirmability refers to the trustworthiness and stability of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher established trustworthiness by maintaining an audit trail of all steps and being transparent in the data collection process, and being reflective in her interpretations of the data.

## **Data Sources**

This section describes the instruments used in the study and how it was designed to capture information based on the research questions.

**instrument.** The overall construction of the instrument was done in consultation with Dr. Nancy A. Humphreys, a member of the researcher's doctoral committee. Dr. Humphreys has

conducted prior research on the fair hearing and has expertise in qualitative research design. Lens' (2012) study regarding administrative law judges' perceptions of and use of discretion in adjudicating hearings served as a guide in question development and structure and in conceptualizing study propositions. Lens' (2012) study has a similar focus as does this one in that it focuses on the role of administrative law judges and the hearing process. Dr. Vicki Lens is well recognized for her work on the fair hearings process and is a member of the researcher's doctoral committee.

The instrument consisted of thirty-one questions in two parts: a 14-item questionnaire used to secure demographic information (Appendix I) and an interview guide consisting of 17 questions that reflected on participants' thoughts around role conflict, role ambiguity, organizational climate, and professional training (Appendix J). Administration of the measure took approximately 25-35 minutes.

Interview questions related to role conflict were adapted from the Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970), Scale, a 14-item measure that has been widely used to acquire views of role conflict and ambiguity of individuals in organizations. The researcher found this scale to be compatible with the study's intent of gaining knowledge about the role perception of hearing officers and useful in the formatting of the interview questions. For example, one of the questions on the Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) Scale is "I receive an incompatible request from two or more people" on which the structured interview question "what are the expectations of others about your role and do these expectations clash with each other" is based. The responses to questions on the Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) Scale are based on a 7-point Likert scale that range from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". In this study questions were adapted so that they were open-ended and permitted study participants to answer in their own

words (Singleton, Straits, & Stratis, 1993, p.260). The Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) Scale is globally known to be a valid and reliable measure of role demands (Khan, Yusoff, Khan, Yasir, & Khan, 2014).

Questions related to organizational climate were adapted from the Litwin and Stringer Organizational Climate Questionnaire (LSOCQ) (Litwin and Stringer, 1968). This measure consists of 50 statements about the organization across nine different dimensions. Though some studies have suggested that a six-factor structure is a more appropriate measure of general affect on climate (Muchinsky, 1976; Sims & LaFollette, 1975), the LSOCQ is one of the best known general measures of organizational climate (Patterson, West, Shackelton, Dawson, Lawthom, Maitlis, Robinson, & Wallace, 2005). Interview questions for this study were premised on six dimensions of the LSOCQ: structure, responsibility, identity, reward, warmth, and conflict, which have been credited with being reliable domains in measuring organizational climate (Patterson, 2005). The responses to questions on the LSOCQ range from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” on a 7-point Likert scale. In this study questions from the above listed dimensions were adapted so that study participants could answer in their own words.

**pilot testing.** The semi-structured interview was piloted in early September 2014 with two individuals who were not a part of the sample population. These interviews were conducted before the beginning of the study; one was done by telephone and the other face-to-face. It allowed the researcher to test the sequencing and length of the questions, examine responses to the questions, and determine similarities and differences between telephone and face-face interviews. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed and participant feedback was obtained. Information from this process was taken into account and used in the final design of the questions used in the structured interview procedures. Pilot studies can be helpful because it

allows the researcher to identify and rectify procedural issues that may not have been anticipated before the study begins (Rubin & Babbie, 2011).

**demographic information.** The 14 demographic questions were utilized to obtain information to describe and summarize some of the personal and professional characteristics of the study's sample. The researcher, in consultation with Dr. Humphreys put together the demographic questions (See Appendix I for the questionnaire). Participants were asked to identify their race, gender, education level and type of degree, prior work experience, length of time on the job and as a hearing officer, and state where employed. Other inquiries related to the hearing process included hearing issues, level of government that the participant worked for and unit auspice, meaning whether the unit is a part of or separate from the welfare agency. Demographic questions were administered at the beginning of the interview. Valene (2002) purports that getting demographic information in the beginning of the interview process is helpful because it allows participants to answer a few questions early in the process without much thought to establish the flow of the interview. Questions were organized so that past employment history was addressed before reflecting on current job status as suggested by several authors. Jackson (2014) suggests that it is logical to seek information related to past employment history before addressing current job status because it provides a smoother flow of information.

**semi-structured interviews.** Seventeen questions and related probes were developed as a part of an interview guide (Appendix J) that was used in semi-structured interviews with study participants. Semi-structured interview questions allow for the preparation of a specific set of questions ahead of time that can be used with different respondents and conducted in person or by telephone (Charmaz, 2006). The interview guide was developed by the researcher and Dr. Nancy A. Humphreys, with the intention of gaining insight into the six research questions

driving the study. Two of the questions, 1 & 4 addressed the study's research questions, "what are hearing officers' beliefs about their jobs" and "how does organizational climate influence job perceptions" (See Table 5). Two of the questions, 2 & 3 addressed research questions, "do hearing officers perceive role conflict in carrying out their jobs" and "do hearing officers perceive ambiguity in carrying out their jobs" (See Table 4). Seven questions focused on research question 5, "how does education and training influence job perceptions" (See Table 6). One question addressed research question 6, "are there other elements that influence job perceptions" (See Table 7).

### **Data Management**

This section describes how the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews was managed and protected to ensure confidentiality.

The manner in which these interviews were structured was that prior to the start of each interview, the participants provided verbal informed consent and were given the option to be recorded or not. All participants agreed to be recorded. The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder, and the data was uploaded from the recorder into a computer with encryption software for analysis. Each questionnaire was assigned a 3-digit sequential number to protect participants' identities. These questionnaires were stored in a secure file cabinet. After interviews, the audio recordings were stored in a separate file with password protection. Each recording was assigned a 3-digit sequential number and a separate document linking the number to the participants was stored separately in a locked file cabinet. The researcher transcribed the audio recordings and after transcribing, all identifying information, including participants' names was removed from the transcripts. These were saved in a separate subfolder on the computer



with password protected, and the transcripts were assigned the same 3-digit code that corresponded with the audio recording.

## **Data Analysis**

**demographic information.** The demographic data was entered manually into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 2014) program, version 22, a quantitative software analysis program. The researcher then created and coded the following new variables, listed in Table 1. The data was entered into an SPSS file and checked for accuracy. These data was analyzed using descriptive statistics for frequency distributions to describe characteristics of the sample.

Table 1

*Demographic variables*

Variable name	Description
ID	Sequence number
AGE	Participant's age
RACE	Participant's race
HISP	If of Hispanic origin
GENDER	Participant's gender
JOBTITLE	Job title
JOBST	State where participant works
HODATE	Date participant became a hearing officer
HOCONT	Yes/no question re hire date
GOVLEV	Level of government participant works for
ORGDATE	Participant's start date with organization
SAMAG	Hearing unit located in same agency
CONAG	Hearing unit located in outside agency
UNITLOC	Hearing unit location
PROGTYP	Types of hearings held
DEGREE	Level of education
UNMAJ	Undergraduate major
GMAJ	Graduate major

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Note: Variables entered into SPSS

***interview data.*** The interview data was analyzed using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Padgett, 2008). Grounded theory is often used to develop theory from real-world settings (Oktay, 2012). Grounded theory entails inductive coding of the data and memo writing to document analytic decisions and integrating theoretical ideas and concepts. In analyzing the interview data, the researcher constructed original ideas from participants' statements and reviewed the information with a fresh perspective and not allowing her knowledge of the subject to overshadow what emerged from the data.

As stated earlier, the interviews were transcribed and all participants' identifying information was redacted. Data were entered manually into QSR NVivo 10, a software program that organizes and manages qualitative data. Coding of the data included the reviewing of each line, noting significant statements that emerged. The researcher also referred to her notes kept in her field journal to reflect on ideas that arose during interviews. After the data was reviewed, a codebook was developed to track the larger emergent themes (Charmaz, 2006), which were parsed into sub-codes and in-vivo, or live codes (Saldana, 2009), listed in Table 3.2. Sensitizing concepts, or recurrent ideas, were collected to provide direction to begin looking for themes. The open codes were narrowed down into more focused codes (Charmaz, 2006) through an iterative process of reviewing the data several times. Codes were matched with emerging theoretical themes.

## **Verification**

The president of NAHO granted the researcher permission to use the membership list as well as to submit an advertisement in the quarterly newsletter to inform members about the study (Appendix B).

Verbal informed consent to take part in the study was obtained from participants prior to the interviews. In this process, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and that participation was voluntary, expectations of and the risks and benefits to them, how confidentiality would be handled, and the researcher's contact information for questions about the study (Appendix D). Participants were also asked if they had any questions and if they consented to participate in the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In August 2014, an application for the use of human subjects, the IRB-1 Protocol Application for Involvement of Human Participants in Research: for Expedited or Full Board Review was completed, was submitted for review to the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and approval was granted under expedited review (Appendix A). Data collected in this study was kept confidential in compliance with the university's established policies. All data were kept in a locked file cabinet and on a password-protected computer with encryption software at the university. Audio recordings were deleted from the recorder once uploaded onto the computer. Once the interview data was transcribed, all participants' identifying information was removed from the transcripts. Upon completion and within five years, all audio files and hard copies of the questionnaires will be destroyed to protect participants' identities. In any situation in which the study's findings are disseminated, it will be reported in aggregate form to avoid the identification of individual participants. .

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the methods and procedures used in the study to address the research questions. It described an exploratory study using the qualitative method of semi-

structured interviews to capture hearing officers' role perceptions about their jobs. The sampling plan including the selection and recruitment of participants, rigor involved in ensuring validity and reliability, instruments used, data collection management and security, and analysis were described.

## **Chapter Three**

### **RESULTS**

This chapter will examine participants' semi-structured interview responses. A brief description of the sample's demographic information will be presented first, followed by the themes that arose from the six research questions. The results are organized so that the themes connect with the research questions.

#### **Sample Results**

From the sampling frame of 280, 31 persons expressed interest, and of those, 27 met criteria and agreed to participate in the study. The participants represented eight states: Connecticut (n=8), Florida (n=1), Iowa (n=2), Mississippi (n=1), North Carolina (n=3), South Carolina (n=4), Texas (n=2), and West Virginia (n=6). Participants ranged in age from 21 to 66 years old, with 57% of them in the 51-60 age range (n=15). Seventy-four percent were women (n=20) and 26% were men (n=7). Eighty-one percent of the sample identified as white (n=21), 11.5% identified as Black/African American (n=3), and 3.8% identified respectively as Asian (n=1), multiple ethnicity (n=1), and of Hispanic origin (n=1).

Approximately 96% of the sample had bachelor's degrees and of those, 6% had a law degree and 4% had associate's degrees. On average, participants worked at their agencies 10 years or less, all were employed with state agencies, and by the same agency administering the welfare benefits for which they carried out hearings. Eighty-two percent of the sample had "hearing officer" in their job title (n=22), followed by 11% as "lead hearing officer" (n=3) who in addition to their role as a hearing officer performed supervisory and administrative functions. Two identified as compliance officers, representing seven percent. While job titles vary by state, officers have similar job responsibilities. The

largest percentage of participants have worked as a hearing officer for 10 years or less, 63%, followed by 11-19 years, 11%, and 20-25 years, 11 percent. Only 11% were employed as an officer for 26 years or more. (See Tables 2 and 3 for demographic information).

Table 2

*Participants' demographic information*

Characteristics	Mean (Range)	Frequencies	Percent
Age (range)	3.38 (41-50)		
21-30		1	4%
31-40		3	11%
41-50		8	30%
51-60		15	55.5
Race			
White		22	81%
Black		3	11%
Asian		1	4%
Multiracial		1	4%
Gender			
Male		8	30%
Female		19	70%
Job Title			
Fair Hearing Officer		12	45%
Hearing Officer		10	37%
Lead Hearing Officer		3	11%
Compliance Officer		2	7%
Years as Hearing Officer	10 years		
10 years or less		17	63%
11-19 years		4	15%
20-25 years		3	11%
26 + years		3	11%
Years with current organization	20.15 years		
10 years or less		6	22%
11-20 years		8	30%
21-30 years		9	33%
31-40 years		4	15%
Work as Hearing Officer with same agency administering benefits		27	100%
Work as Hearing Officer with a contract agency	0	0	0%
Type of Degree	Bachelor		
Associate		1	4%
Bachelor		19	74%



Masters	1	4%
Professional	6	22%

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n=27

\*Numbers in percentages column rounded up to the nearest tenth.

Table 3

*Participants' degree majors*

DEGREE	N
Anthropology	2
Communication	1
Counseling	1
General Studies	2
Human Development	4
Human Services	5
International Relations	1
Music Therapy	1
Pre-law	1
Psychology	5
Sociology	4

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N=27  
Note: Undergraduate degrees

## Themes

From the semi-structured interviews, participants' responses were grouped to develop the common themes which emerged.

## conflict.

Table 4

### *Role Conflict themes*

<b>Research question: Do hearing officers perceive conflict in carrying out their jobs?</b>  Structured interview questions:  Tell me about an example of a situation where these expectations clashed with each other.  In hearing cases, what kinds of programs cause you the most difficult?	
Major Themes	Subthemes
Rivalry between hearing parties	Appellants, their attorneys, eligibility staff wanting officer to rule in each's favor
Resistance	Attorney grandstanding Client emotional outbursts Unprepared agency staff Agency staff discouraging clients

The two major themes emerged regarding role conflict were rivalry that exists between hearing parties, and the resistance they exhibit in hearings.

***rivalry between hearing parties.*** Officers experienced rivalry between the eligibility staff, and appellants and their attorneys, in that each wanted the officer to rule in their favor. Officers believed that all parties came to hearings with the expectation that their position was “right” and competed to convince the officer of such. In particular that agency employees believed that hearing officers are supposed to uphold their views. Most participants suspected that because they are employed by the same agency as the eligibility workers, the worker believed that the officers should support their positions. The following statements represent this viewpoint:

*“We would have staff members that would believe that, because you work within the agency, that you would support their decisions, because you work within the agency. We’re neutral. So sometimes that is hard.”*

Participants posited that agency workers' opinions about hearings were that they are a waste of time, implying that appellants are not entitled to hearings. They reported that workers get defensive if questioned by clients about their actions, and sometimes interferes with the hearing proceedings. Most agreed that staff took their rulings as the final truth, took their positions personally and felt they were correct because of their experience with implementing policy as reflected in these comments:

*"And so the clash with the workers is, not necessarily will I find that way (in their favor), so they have attitudes of 'of course I'm right, why are you questioning me?'"*

*"I had difficulty one time when a case was ruled opposite of the way the people representing the department felt it should have been decided...they were not happy..."*

*"Workers...that felt, and they'd even say it during the hearing, they [appellants] shouldn't be eligible for a hearing, this is our policy and we know it better than the clients do..."*

Another officer, with two years of hearings experience but over 30 years in the agency, recalled in detail one encounter where the staff person attempted to thwart the hearing in the appellant's presence:

*The worker comes into the hearing and blears out, "I told Mr. X that it made no sense for him to go forward with the hearing because the hearing officer is going to rule in the Department's favor because we are right, but he insisted on coming in to speak with you. Can you tell him that he's not gonna win anyway?"*

Agencies are inundated with client requests for assistance, and demands are placed on workers to maintain the workflow despite heavy caseloads. Participants believe that agency workers value their time and become annoyed when they have to utilize their time to attend hearings. That they are busy and do not have the time to participate in hearings. Some thought that workers think the appellants request hearings to stall the reduction and/or discontinuance of their benefits, since they continue to receive the same benefits until a hearing decision is made.

Similarly, appellants expect officers to rule in their favor because of their difficult life circumstances which they believe are unique and exceptional. Appellants plead with hearing officers to

consider their rough life circumstances in their decision-making. Most of the officers agreed with this concept and their thoughts are reflected in the comments below:

*“They’re [clients] hoping the decision is in their favor, but it’s not necessarily in accordance with the law and the policy. So they’re hoping to get more benefits and I think they’re also, hopefully understanding that...that I have to follow the policy, the regulations and law in effect when making my decision.”*

*“I still don’t know if they understand, their expectations are [that] I still am able to somehow arbitrarily say, eh I think we can help you even though you don’t fit any of these [categories].”*

*“I think a lot of the general population thinks that we can change things...”*

Officers postulated that in addition to the workers and the appellants, attorneys also think they will not be fair in their decision making and are biased towards the agencies. These attorneys believe that officers are influenced by their supervisors and agency managers to side with the agencies, and have been accused of allowing management to deliberate and write decisions for them. For example, study participants from one state discussed efforts by a group of attorneys to push for legislation for a central panel system that would house the officers in a separate agency and location from the welfare agency. Participants speculated that these perceptions are based on their being employed by the same agency as, as the workers and their own legal counsel. Though participants reported that cases are randomly assigned to them, they noted that attorneys will sometimes “shop” for particular hearing officers whom they believe will be fair towards clients. For example, the attorney might reschedule a hearing if they are scheduled with an officer that they think is unsympathetic. The following example reflects the experiences of several participants:

*...so the attorney challenged me and asked me “since your legal counsel decided that the client’s trust is an available asset, how will you, as the hearing officer, go against his decision despite the evidence that we present you today that states the contrary? Your department has a long-standing reputation of allowing your agency counsel to write and make decisions for you.” I just smiled, because this attorney has been fighting for years to have our unit separated from within the department....*

*Attorneys will schedule hearings for clients, and depending on the hearing officer assigned, they will request the hearing be rescheduled until the case is assigned to a hearing officer who they believe will be pro-client...they really believe that officers do whatever the agency wants them to do...*

**resistance.** Study participants discussed the concept of resistance on the part of staff, workers, and attorneys representing appellants during the hearings process. Because agency staff believe that hearings are a waste of time, they might not appear at hearings, or provide any written documentation for the hearing officer or appellant. Moreover, they might display a negative attitude towards the appellant. Most of the views were represented by the following statements:

*“Usually it’s workers who are [pause] ... [they] make it the most difficult because when the workers are uncooperative, it’s frustrating and it hurts more because they should know what they’re doing and why we’re here.”*

*“Honestly, employees that are representing the department in the hearing (cause conflict). They don’t take the hearings process seriously, they’re unprepared, they don’t have respect for the process.”*

Participants argued that staff resistance impedes the appellant’s ability to obtain the benefits that they need. One officer voiced frustration with agency staff:

*I find it more difficult to deal with the people within the agency. This is my perception, those who are more interested in beefing up their title, beefing up their salary, as opposed to making the system work wherein we can make benefits more accessible to the public.*

Most officers believed if agency staff were more focused on doing their jobs correctly, there would be fewer errors made on cases, resulting in fewer requests for hearings. Participants felt appellants were frustrated with the system and anticipated that their experiences would be no different than with the larger agency and often expressed these feelings during the hearing. It was believed that the appellants feared that officers were biased towards the agency. Study participants suggested that appellants did not fully understand the hearings process. Most views about appellants’ resistance reflect the following:

*“Sometimes we get phone calls from an appellant, the person who the appeal was related to, and they’re unhappy with the determination and they don’t think that you’ve thoroughly reviewed their case, they don’t think you understand. That’s common.”*

*“The very emotional claimants are a challenge and understandably so, they lost their benefits and want to know why...”*

Another officer with nine years’ experience discussed frustration with an appellant’s perception of bias:

*I have had one experience in particular [that] stands out where the person [appellant] said, that “you’re with them”, meaning on that side, meaning the Medicaid provider, and it was hostile! I tried to take myself out of that and I don’t let that affect my decision...in fact, I ruled in the client’s favor...*

Officers have to reach decisions supported by strict federal policy, and review benefit calculations based on complex formulas, as prescribed by regulations. This offers little leeway to overturn agency actions on correctly applied policies, and often the appellant will be disappointed. A couple of officers expressed conflict related to making decisions that they believed would adversely affect clients:

*Someone may, for example, appeal the amount of SNAP benefits they’re receiving. And they’ll come into the hearing and they’ll say, “this is my income and this is how much my bills are each month and I’m having a hard time just making it”, and they will get angry, start crying...although there is a specific formula the federal government has created that determines an individual’s SNAP allotment, they are hoping that there is something I can do about that...I do not have the power to change this policy and this policy was correctly applied.*

*“I struggle with the idea that my decision will impact a client such that they can never work in a day care again and they can never be a foster parent [pause]...”*

Participants describe attorneys “grandstanding” during hearings as a source of stress for them. Most participants complained that attorneys are long-winded in their arguments and try to persuade them with fancy rhetoric and legal briefs to convince them of their position. They described attorney conduct as similar to that in a court trial proceeding which is unnecessary for administrative hearings.

Participants expressed that this behavior may be due to attorneys’ beliefs that officers’ are biased

towards the agencies.

*“Because they [attorneys] try and, they’re long winded, they’re long spoken, and they try and they think they have a law degree and I don’t... and they try to use that as an advantage with the law.”*

*“The claimants were represented by an attorney, and the attorney was quite contentious. I wanted to redirect the witness to just answer the questions as presented and the attorney said ‘you can’t do that’ [to me] because I was a hearing officer.”*

One participant addressed the attorneys’ use of legal jargon as intimidating and feeling badgered by them in order to get her to rule in their favor. She offered her remedy for keeping the hearing process balanced:

*Depends on situation, not as a group but individuals in a group, sometimes attorneys might make it difficult because it [the hearing] becomes a more formal process. There’s also balancing it when there’s somebody that isn’t represented and there’s an attorney on one side, so that that person who isn’t represented has a chance to present their evidence and information and the attorneys don’t take over.*

The majority of the participants believed that parties involved in hearings were their primary sources of stress. One respondent described another source of conflict as being denied opportunities for promotion to supervisory positions which is common for the less senior staff.

The participant felt that the unit was becoming political like the larger agency:

*When there was a promotion in the unit, it would go to the most senior hearing officer, or the next in line considered to be the most senior hearing officer. Lately, that is not the case, sometimes you find the least senior hearing officer gets promoted and then you... have to train that person...and that’s a clash.*

## ambiguity.

Table 5

### *Role ambiguity themes*

<b>Research question: Do hearing officers experience role ambiguity in carrying out their jobs?</b>  Structured interview questions:  Staying with the subject of expectations, tell me about an experience where you felt unclear about your role as a hearing officer.  What kinds of issues cause you the most difficulty and why?	
Major Themes	Subthemes
<b>Lack of expertise with specific programs</b>	<b>Determining medical necessity for procedures like orthodontia or medicines</b> <b>Not understanding medical terminology and diagnoses</b> <b>Not familiar with particular program policy</b>
<b>Difficulty in developing facts</b>	<b>Unclear or contradictory evidence/testimony</b>

*lack of expertise with specific programs.* The major theme that arose in relation to role ambiguity centered on a lack of expertise about specific policies and complex medical issues, usually related to Medicaid. Officers shared that they may not have prior experience in all areas of agency policy (Refer to Table 5). When conducting a hearing with an unfamiliar policy area, there may be some angst in terms of being able to ask the right questions during the hearing in order to gather pertinent facts. For example, in conducting Medicaid hearings, officers have several determinations to make: whether or not a medical procedure may be medically necessary; which are cost-effective health care services that a physician would provide to a patient for the purpose of preventing, evaluating, diagnosing, or treating an illness, injury, disease, or its symptoms; which are in accordance with generally accepted standards of medical practice. This



requires that officers have a general understanding of medical conditions and the appropriate treatment. The majority of officers shared this belief. Participant statements included:

*“I don’t have a lot of background in child support [policies] so I feel a little, I’m not as confident in that program...”*

*“[It is difficult] making decisions looking at medical records and you have two doctors on both sides and my background is not in medicine...”*

*“We have to hold hearings on every program that the Department administers, and I don’t have expertise in all the areas, and with the managed care hearings, we’re making decisions on complex medical issues...I’m not a doctor.”*

One participant described an experience where she felt unclear about her role based on experiences with other attorneys:

*I did have a time when I’ve been here...we did evidentiary hearings and our process is basically informal. But it becomes formal sometimes when we have attorneys involved and they try to turn it into something where they’re in court; even though I have a law degree, I’ve never practiced so dealing with that situation and that how in which we did our job for a period of time, was something that was unclear in terms of what our expectations were...*

**difficulty in developing facts.** A second theme that emerged related to role ambiguity was being unable to develop facts from the evidence from the hearing parties in order to render a decision. Hearing officers conduct hearings on several social services programs, and may not have direct experience with each of them. Yet in their decision making, they are expected to apply the appropriate law and policy. Developing the hearing record, which is collecting the evidence and recording the proceedings, is an important aspect of the officers’ decision-making. Evidence may consist of the parties’ testimony and documents from the appellants, attorneys, or agency that are submitted in support of their positions. When officers review this information and the facts around the case are not clear or inconsistent, it is difficult to determine the truth. This caused them to feel less confident in how they should rule. The following examples represent what most described as being unclear with facts:

*“In those cases I would say where there was confusing facts. I guess that would be the case across the board, if the facts of a case are convoluted...”*

*“When I say difficult I’m thinking more policy-wise in terms of interpreting the facts...”*

One officer with 16 years of experience shared an incident where he and a supervisor clashed regarding his interpretation of the facts in a hearing:

*I remember one particular case that I had, that I called the way I interpreted the facts and somehow my boss had a different interpretation of the facts and before you knew it, they [the appellant] were given a new hearing--so someone else can interpret those facts...*

This participant expressed feeling uncertain when his supervisor questioned his method of gathering facts, it affected his confidence in his being able to carrying out his job.

### **organizational climate.**

Table 6

#### *Organizational climate themes*

**Research questions: How does organizational climate influence their job perceptions?**

**How do hearing officers feel about their agencies?**

Structured interview questions:

How would you describe the climate of the total organization?

How do you feel about the climate of the unit in which you work?

Major Themes	Subthemes
Constant policy and procedural changes	Role adaptation Increased job responsibilities Dynamic legislative policy mandates Dynamic agency shifts Constant leadership change
Decreased role autonomy	Shift in management philosophy
Mutual aid	Coworker support Coworker consultation

The major themes that evolved from responses related to organizational climate were the constant policy and procedural changes that agencies encounter, decreased autonomy in decision-making, and mutual aid provided to each other within the hearing units.

***constant policy and procedural changes***. The majority of participants acknowledged the occurrence of dynamic, cyclical change within the organizations. They described how changes to policy and procedures occur regularly as a consequence of the myriad governmental changes to programs and services because of legislative processes, often influenced by the socioeconomic climate of the country. Though change was anticipated and expected, programs targeted for change were not always known ahead of time, and often resulted in procedural adjustments that happened immediately. The hearing officers must be “quick studies” in that they must become abreast of all policy changes in order to apply them correctly. Comments below represent the majority mindset:

*“Change is constantly occurring based on the legislature. Sometimes it’s hard to keep up...”*

*“Our agency is currently experiencing a lot of difficulties with the legislature in regards to the agency as a whole and some of the services and what not...it’s uncertain...”*

*“Presently I find the climate, somewhat conducive to change. There’s a lot being undertaken right now with respect to programs overall and the [agency] system overall that’s being undertaken by the government. [pauses] The re-structuring and reorganization of the way we [agency] do business.”*

Most officers agreed that legislative policy change resulted in reduced services to clients, increased caseloads, and business-like or impersonal operations as opposed to more interpersonal encounters. Participant comments reflected their current opinions regarding their agency’s climate. Several were summed up in two- to three-word sentences:

*“It sucks!”*

*“The agency’s bad...”*

One theme emerged over and over—the climate is negative and impacts workers’ morale. One officer thought that the front-line eligibility workers felt the greatest impact of these changes, yet recognized their resiliency in doing their best to provide services to clients despite the changes:

*“I would say we have a lot of hard workers; a lot of good people with good intentions. And just doing our best to work through the sometimes complex programs on a day to day basis.”*

Some officers suggested that another consequence to policy and procedural changes was administrative shifts, where new leaders were or are appointed to run the agencies. Changes in political leadership result in changes in agency administration as newly elected officials select their choice of staff. These administrative shifts are often driven by the state’s political agendas. Some participants expressed that changes in leadership impacted agency operations, resulting in procedures that resemble a business and poorer services to clients.

*Well, we’re trying to find our way right now. We have a new administration. They’re new, they don’t have government experience, they don’t have...well, they’re very young and they don’t have very much experience of any kind. So we’re trying to, we’re making mistakes but you know it’ll be okay, everybody’s learning, and it’s usually the roughest in the beginning--so that’s kind of where we are.*

*Well, morale is terrible, the system we have changed to as far as serving the customers in [state] is terrible, we aren’t supported as far as getting the tools we need, getting the support we need, the training we need, getting the materials we need, getting the processing staff we need. I don’t think the clients are really being served; I don’t know that we have ever been worse at it than we are now. I think it’s being run more like a business than an agency. And it’s not; I’m not treating the customers like humans at all...Our unit is basically stagnant. We just sit back and wait for the change to be implemented and then we play catch up...*

**decreased role autonomy.** Participants expressed that these changes have resulted in an erosion of their autonomy. This is based on beliefs about changes to leadership or agency philosophy that impact officers’ ability to operate without agency interference. Most officers blamed this on management placing limits on their discretion to independently make decisions, which made them feel disrespected and that their suggestions were not welcomed or encouraged. Some of the comments included:

*It just seems like they're pushing on the work now and they don't want our opinions and I know that it's not just me...or offer our suggestions anymore in meetings or be given a pep talk which basically says, 'you're lucky to have your job'.*

*The autonomy has been diminishing in terms of what it was like years ago. Sometimes I feel like we don't get to make the decision as we see fit and that sometimes we're being spoon fed with how to rule on a particular issue.*

Independence is a valued trait for officers in their job performance. It is the hallmark function that delineates the jobs of hearing officers from front line workers (Lens, 2012). It is the ability to evaluate the agency's actions on cases without feeling pressure to rule in the agency's favor, despite being agency employees. Several participants expressed these sentiments:

*"I wouldn't keep working this long if I did not like what I do and the people that I work with and how I'm allowed to do my job with no interference."*

*"In my office, I'm proud to be doing my job and we, even though we work for the Department of Social Services, we're in another building and we're separate from there and I feel no pressure from the main business..."*

**mutual aid.** When asked about their perceptions of organizational climate in their units, participants described feeling positive about cohesiveness in their units. Despite the changes going on within the larger organizations, officers felt support from their peers and could count on each other. Most of the responses were reflected by these comments:

*"The climate of the unit is not as stressed out as working in a regional office doing eligibility."*

*"I would say positive [referring to climate in the unit]. The people there have a lot of experience. So that combined experience provides assisted security [to officers] if that makes sense..."*

*"But within our unit, I think we have a very strong unit, everyone's willing to help everyone else."*

The support they experience between each other within their units buffers them from the sentiments of the larger agency.

## professional training.

Table 7

*Themes related to professional training*

<b>Research question: How do education and training influence their role perceptions?</b> Structured interview questions: Are you in school now? How did your education prepare you as a hearing officer? What training did you have to prepare you to be a hearing officer? When did you have these trainings? How was it done? Where did you receive training? Have you participated in trainings offered by NAHO?	
Major Themes	Subthemes
<b>Peer-trained</b> <b>Due process and evidentiary review</b>	<b>Shadowing coworkers</b> <b>Listening to audio recordings</b> <b>Attorney training</b> <b>Prior welfare work experience</b>
<b>Working with different people</b> <b>Technical writing skills</b>	<b>Human services courses in college</b> <b>Writing papers for college assignments</b>

Participant responses about education and training pointed to the themes of being peer-trained on their jobs, due process and evidentiary review training acquired through NAHO, educational and academic experiences, and the significance of technical writing skills.

**peer-trained.** All participants were trained by their peers on-the-job and reported relying on them for job related information. Shadowing coworkers was the most widely used training method, followed by officers listening to or watching audio or video recordings of hearings and reading older hearing case decisions. Some agencies hired attorneys to provide additional training to new officers. Participants quipped that their agencies have no formal mechanisms in place for them to receive officer training other than through peers. The majority of responses regarding training were reflected in the following thoughts:

*“Then we spend about two weeks [in training], but not every day of the two weeks, traveling to where the more tenured hearing officers had their offices, and we sat in on their hearings, we listened to recordings of hearings and read the decisions based on the recordings.”*

*“In the old days, things were different. In the old days I was trained by my supervisor and a worker. I would watch a hearing and then I would do a hearing. There was no formal training whatsoever.”*

*“So for me, being thrown into this role by the seat of my pants is probably the best way for me to do well.”*

*“Like, none [when asked what training was received]. Basically I sat in two different hearings and that was it. I listened to recordings and looked at decisions.”*

Most officers have prior work experience with welfare programs, and suggested that their prior agency experience benefitted them in their roles as hearing officers. For example, their experience helped them to be able to gather the relevant information for case deliberation. Being familiar with welfare policy helped officers determine quickly whether or not the agency staff acted correctly in their roles. Some study participants shared their thoughts about prior work experience:

*“It’s kind of on-the-job training, I would say, to be a hearing officer. You have to have a certain amount of time working in eligibility or other jobs as a quality control reviewer like I did.”*

*“Other than just my prior experience with the agency and some knowledge of the public assistance benefits I would be having hearings on once I was hired, it was a lot of basically job shadowing...”*

*“Thirty years of experience with the agency and the programs helped me a great deal in doing the job...I know how the policy should be applied...”*

Some welfare agencies contracted with attorneys to provide additional training to newly hired officers on administrative law procedures in conducting hearings, such as understanding legal terminology and officer conduct in the hearings. Some participants shared their experiences with attorney training:

*“...we had on-the-job training. I shadowed different hearing officers and we went out in the field at the time, so I learned from each one of them. In addition we had a law professor come in and discuss due process and reviewing evidence.”*

*“When we went to the evidentiary process [trainings], we did have attorneys come up from the Department of Justice and they kind of went through the list and provided leaflets with information...”*

*“Sometimes the attorney for the Board of Review (within the Hearings Agency) will go over things like that with us. And one of the attorneys down there was very interested in the Board of*

*Review so he made a point at all the meetings to have something to go over, rules of evidence, the best ways to conduct hearings and things like that...*

***due process and evidentiary review.*** Since the sampling frame was secured from the NAHO membership list, a question was asked of participants regarding the impact of training provided by NAHO. Participants expressed that NAHO trainings were helpful in understanding their authority in conducting hearings, how to handle evidence, and how to control hearings. The trainings were provided as videos downloaded from the organization's website or received training during NAHO conferences. Participation in NAHO is voluntary, but most shared that their agencies provided them with opportunities to attend the organization's conferences. Officers who attended conferences felt that NAHO equipped them with necessary skills to conduct hearings. The most helpful trainings were those on due process, controlling hearings, and evidentiary basics as supported by officers' responses below:

*"NAHO, National Association of Hearing Officials, they are really aware of what's going on and when the specific training came in, it's separate from the agencies, totally..."*

*"Due process, conduct, and control of hearings—and those were all good [NAHO workshops]. Conduct and control because when you're dealing with two lawyers battling, you've really gotta be on your game. Other workshops...history of administrative law, ethics."*

*"Well, I had a little bit at my orientation for the position, but a lot of it has come from attending the NAHO conference. They certainly have classes on evidence and due process and all of that and I've certainly taken those."*

*"I like the evidentiary things which I pretty much know. I like the ones controlling the court room. The ones that L and W teach where again, they're talking about is trying to put yourself in a position where people come before you and try to be understanding and to try to put yourself in the place of the people who are not experienced in the hearing process."*

Only one participant reported that they received outside training from another professional organization, the National Association of Administrative Law Judiciary (NAALJ).

***working with different people.*** Educational and academic training helped increase officers' competencies in working with diverse groups of people. This training was described as specific courses



taken during their educational pursuits that were within the social services disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, or human services. Most agreed that their coursework helped them understand that people have different types of problems and that it was important for them to communicate with their clients about their life situations. Examples of responses to academic experiences:

*“My concentration was human development and family relations, so we talked about every level from childhood up to gerontology. So I think that that made me more comfortable going into a job in this agency with people.”*

*“As a psychology major in college...I worked with kids, I worked at a residential facility for about eight or nine months so I did a lot of writing and charting things down, working one on one, talking with the other treatment team people...”*

*“My background is in, like I said I have a human services degree. I think that obviously prepared me in working for the department...”*

*“Well I think that I learned how to communicate well and I now can communicate with a variety of people. I can communicate with Medicaid beneficiaries. I can kind of read between the lines when they complain about what they’re complaining about....”*

In addition to human services degrees, three participants credited their law school training as helpful in deliberating decisions:

*“I would say that in addition to my undergraduate experience, also my law degree has given me critical thinking skills and analysis skills that are necessary to render fair impartial decisions, and accurate decisions.”*

*“Getting a juris doctor, I learned a little about the court rooms and evidence and the law.”*

*“My major was prelaw so it kind of helped me to analyze law in order to apply law and provide me with the necessary skills to read and write in a way that I can get my point across and others can actually read what the point is I’m trying to make.”*

**technical writing skills.** Officers believe that their experiences with written assignments in college enhanced their competencies in writing case decisions. Technical writing skills were the rigors associated with writing papers including researching for, organizing, and revising these for class assignments in college. Several participants credited these experiences in helping them write decisions:

*“I think the education with the technical writing stuff in college was a huge benefit.”*

*“I wrote a lot in college. Most of my education was not ‘read this book and take a test on it’. It was a lot of technical writing. So that has obviously come in handy...”*

*“My education helped me in terms of providing me with the necessary skills to read and write in a way that I can get my point across and others can actually read what the point is I’m trying to make.”*

One participant attributed the combination of social services and legal education as helpful for advancing technical writing skills:

*I think it [education] helped me in being able to extract facts, to write a little bit more concisely, and I think had I not had my juris doctor and that experience, I don’t think I would have felt as confident when I first started.*

### **other elements.**

Table 8

*Themes related to other elements*

<b>Research question: Are there other elements that influence their role perceptions?</b> Structured interview questions: Are there things outside the job that cause you stress? Probe: work, home, family	
Major Themes	Subthemes
Work-life balance	Juggling work and family priorities
Personal experiences with welfare	Receiving benefits in the past Family members receiving welfare benefits

The popular themes that emerged related to other elements that influence role beliefs was balancing work and home life and personal experiences with welfare services, either as children or when helping family members.

**work-life balance.** Juggling work and family priorities were common and typical of most participants. The most common response was, “who doesn’t have family stress?” The overall belief was that normal life meant balancing family issues and work. Below are some participants’ responses:

*“Oh yeah...just breathing causes me stress. My aging parents, family needs, the way time is compressed, and you no longer have the energy to do what you need to...”*

*“I have family, I have a husband, I have a son, I commute here which is a 45-50 minute drive every day so that causes stress in getting back and forth here and having things at home...”*

None of the participants expressed that their home life issues were influencing work. In fact, the overall belief was that “life happens” and that everyone experiences stress on some level in their lives.

One participant shared how he keeps home and work separate:

*I leave that outside the work and then I deal with whatever stress I have to deal with at work. When I go home, vice versa—whatever stress I have at work, I leave it at work and not bring it home because there’s enough at home to deal with...*

***personal experiences with welfare.*** A few participants opened up about their personal experiences with welfare programs and its impact on their roles, and felt that these helped them relate to the clients’ disparities. These experiences helped them empathize with the appellants’ circumstances:

*“Having relatives who are currently Medicaid recipients make it significant to the program and their importance to me.”*

*“I’ve had family members who have had to apply for assistance. I’ve had family members who have been on our waiver program, which allows you to stay in the community rather than in a nursing home.”*

*“When I was a kid, my parents were divorced and we were on food stamps for probably the first year ‘til my mother got her stuff together, my father started paying child support...”*

***judicious execution of policy (“doing the right thing”).*** Another general theme which emerged, although not part of the six research questions, was officers’ beliefs about doing what is right. This is the value officers placed on being fair. It seemed that they equated fairness with doing the right thing, which included listening to all sides, reviewing all evidence, and carefully interpreting federal and state program policies in order to determine facts to properly carry out their jobs. All participants expressed a desire to be fair and reach good, sound decisions that would stand up if challenged by the agencies, the public, or through a higher-level appeal. Several participants shared common statements:

*“I make the best decision(s) on federal, state law and statutes in the State of CT. Not to be biased towards either party in the decision.”*

*“To conduct fair and impartial hearings and render clear decisions that anyone with any type of education would be able to understand as well as something that is going to stand up in a court of law.”*

*“To be thorough, unbiased, and professional...”*

Good decisions were thought of as the use of evidence supported by facts and policy.

Participants believed they provided a platform for all parties at the hearing to be heard, especially for appellants. Most participants recognized that appellants’ voices were not always heard so they permitted them to address factors in hearings that may not be connected to the hearing issue. The following statements were representative of their beliefs:

*“...from the [perspective of the] person requesting the hearing that they will be heard, to tell their story, even if it’s something that doesn’t really deal with the info I need to make my decision but that they’re heard and that I am impartial...”*

*“Sometimes the claimant or grievant just rely on me being an impartial person to fairly hear what they have to say.”*

*“That everyone treats each other with respect in my hearings room and that everyone has a chance to be heard.”*

Not all participants believed that appellants are unheard. In fact, one participant expressed frustration with appellants and their attitudes of entitlements in hearings even though she maintains impartiality:

*“It’s damned if you do, damned if you don’t with some of these folks. I listen to clients screaming about benefits that they never worked for, like if you use that same energy to find a job...they’d be better off. I just sit and listen but sometimes I just wanna go off on them...”*

In summary, participants perceived conflict as a result of the rivalry between agency staff, appellants, and their attorneys, in expecting them to rule in their favor because each believed that they acted correctly. It suggests that officers think that none of the parties believe they will be fair. Perceived resistance from all hearing parties created feelings of stress. Officers perceived role ambiguity when there was lack of clarity around specific job responsibilities, such as unfamiliar policy, Medicaid-

related issues, or when case facts were ambiguous. Despite officers' negative feelings about the climate of their agencies, they felt positive mutual support among themselves in their units. Officers relied on peer training, followed by listening to/watching audio and video recordings, and training offered by contracted attorneys contracted by their agencies. Academic courses in social services areas were viewed as helpful in working with diverse populations. The rigors of academic technical writing were credited with helping officers write concise and informative decisions. NAHO training was considered valuable, especially on topics of due process, evidentiary review, and hearing conduct. Participants reported that they balanced work and home life the same as other people and considered juggling both as normal functioning in everyday living. They did not think that their life situation influenced their work. Finally, officers expressed concern with doing the right thing in being fair and impartial decision makers in spite of the constant, stressful changes related to policy changes.

## **Chapter Four**

### **DISCUSSION**

The study explored the views of hearing officers who are members of the National Association of Hearing Officials and who conduct administrative hearings about their role and the influence of the organization on their viewpoint. Of significance to the assessment of hearing officers' perceptions was the concept of role theory including conflict and ambiguity and the influence of organizational climate and education and training on their job experiences? Additionally, the study sought to establish basic demographics of the participants and to identify whether their educational training was in human services, and specifically in social work.

#### **Demographics**

Although it was anticipated that there may be participants with social work degrees or training, the sample did not yield any one with that criteria. Social workers employed by welfare agencies do not customarily occupy eligibility positions; their training and competencies draw them to pursue other careers in social work. That is just one explanation for the lack of social workers identified in the sample. A Masters in Social Work (MSW) is a terminal practice degree for social workers and allows them flexibility in taking on a number of roles in practice situations such as mental health, education, child welfare, or in health care settings. A social worker with a Bachelors in Social Work can also practice in community agencies in entry-level positions, work for child welfare agencies, gain entry-level state or federal agency work, or perform case management activities in direct service settings. So social workers have a variety of options in selecting career paths in addition to working for public assistance programs.

#### **Conflict**

When asked if they perceived conflict in carrying out their jobs, study participants affirm that

they experienced conflict in their role as hearing officers. They feel that much of the discord experienced results from their having to manage competing and equally important demands of the hearing process. These include dealing with appellants who expect officers to empathize with them and overturn agency actions, because of their challenging circumstance. Convincing agency staff that their knowledge about the application of policy is not always correct particularly as it relates to the appellants' cases should not cause them to dissuade appellants from pursuing the hearing process. Clashing with attorneys who represent appellants who sometime accuse them of being "pawns" for the agency in that they rule according to the agency's desires. The dilemma is that despite officers' efforts to be fair and impartial, they believe that none of the parties trust the process and ultimately some of these individuals will be disappointed with their ruling.

Hearing officers remarked that hearings are complex and managing them can be overwhelming. For example, the number of participants in a hearing could range from 2 to 10 persons. Depending on evidence needed testimonies may be required from several of these persons. At times attorneys' presentations can be argumentative and combative even though they are trying to act in the best interest of whomever they are representing. Often clients express feeling powerless and angry that their benefits have been reduced or discontinued and yell and cry. Though officers must carry out the hearings, at the same time they acknowledge the need to listen to the clients' concerns and be supportive of them. Additionally, deliberation on their decisions requires that they examine large amounts of information including the testimonies, paperwork on behalf of the agency and clients, and pages of federal and state policies and procedures.

Another theme related to conflict was that of staff, appellants, and attorneys' resistance in the form of oppositional behavior during the hearing process. Agency staff resistance is described as attending hearings unprepared, not providing officers or appellants with department summaries and

evidence in a timely manner to review them, or attempting to stop hearings from proceeding because they are perceived as “a waste of time”. Resistance from workers seemingly arise when they are questioned about case actions. One illustration of this phenomenon is when a staff worker expresses to the appellant that “you can’t win” and that “the hearing officer is going to rule that I’m right”. It is likely that the agency staff worker feels that he/she is more familiar with the agency policy and the appellants’ rights and do not perceive that these have been violated. Moreover, welfare workers still operate under the ideology of the “deserving versus undeserving poor” (Katz, 2013; Kingfisher, 1998), where distinctions are made between clients considered poor through no fault of their own (deserving), and those who are considered lazy and dishonest (undeserving). These behaviors were described in previous research on the negative attitudes of welfare workers towards clients, causing them to feel powerless and devalued (Hagen, 1989; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Seecombe, James, & Walters, 1998; Watkins-Hayes, 2009), or being untruthful to get increased benefits or advantages (Hagen & Owens-Manley, 2002). Historically, attitudes about support for welfare programs (financial assistance, Medicaid, Food Stamps) have been overwhelmingly negative, often racialized, and deemed as a basis for encouraging laziness among poor persons and people of color (Hasenfeld, 2007; Johnson, 2002). Depictions of the poor as lazy “brood mares” “driving Cadillacs” were heard repeatedly across the US House of Representatives during the period of major welfare reform in the 1990s which resulted in significant changes to the administration of the “ending welfare as we know it” time of welfare reform (Gilens, 1999; Hancock, 2003). Additionally, research on public support for welfare spending suggests that perceptions of who receives benefits and current sociopolitical trends contribute to public opinion and support for decreased spending and cuts to programs (Shram & Soss, 2002). Because state policy makers are sensitive to these opinions, their response is to reduce spending in these areas and ultimately cut programs that benefit the poor (Johnson, 2002). These actions potentially impact the constant back



and forth policy changes that welfare agencies experience, as reported by participants in the study. For example, viewpoints that people must be encouraged to work for public assistance benefits has created pressure to revisit policy mandates of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, otherwise known as Food Stamps that imposed a time limit of 3 months for able-bodied individuals without dependents (known as ABAWDs) to receive SNAP benefits ([www.fns.gov](http://www.fns.gov), 2014). This was one of the strictest policy provisions associated with welfare reform measures of 1996. States were able to waive this restriction for several years because of the high rates of unemployment since 2006 resulting in an increase of people needing food assistance. Because of the growing pressure from the public and angry policy makers that believe that assistance discourages motivations to work and that people receiving benefits should work for them, many of these state waivers will expire starting in 2016, and because of the dropping unemployment rates, many states will no longer qualify for the waiver. Congress has the power to reverse or relax this restriction but action is unlikely because of public pressure to force recipients to work. This change has the potential to impact over a million Americans (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2015).

Issues that affect workers include large caseloads coupled with voluminous paperwork, long hours, and clients facing complex problems. In addition, issues that impact workers from the agency point to frequent policy changes as mandated by state and federal policy requirements, issues of personal safety, inadequate training and supervision, as well as inadequate resources to serve clients. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Ellis, Westbrook, Ellett, 2006; Hasenfeld, 2006). All of these have the potential to impact workers' perspective about and relationship with the organizations in which they work. Brodtkin (1997) asserted that front-line workers' decision making was determined more by bureaucratic constraints and their own biases rather than client need. Agency staff may believe that they are still perceived in this manner, and think that officers share the same perceptions as the public.

Appellants' resistance is characterized as expressing anger and frustration with the welfare system not being fair in providing them with adequate help. Behavior sometimes is exhibited by emotional outbursts such as yelling at the agency representative or hearing officer, arm flailing and crying to the hearing officer to the hearing officer at times expressing how their worker does not return phone calls or in what ways they are suffering because of adverse case action. For example, clients will telephone a hearing officer and complain that their home utilities have been shut off because the agency discontinued their benefits. Perhaps this behavior is related to the notion that the officer is predisposed in a positive manner towards the agency and the appellants may view the officer as being more sympathetic to their cause than the worker, historically distrusted by clients (Abramovitz, 2001; Sandfort, 2001).

Hearing officers' examples of attorney resistance include grandstanding, gesturing, going off-topic, using legal jargon and persuasion to defend their position against the agency. Officers express conflict as it related to how the attorneys used these tactics to intimidate them into ruling in their favor, and their belief that attorneys think that officers are incompetent around hearing and legal matters because they are not attorneys. In addition, these behaviors prolong hearing proceedings unnecessarily because often no new information emerges and the attorneys are just finding several different ways to present the same arguments. This behavior may indicate that attorneys are challenging the hearing officers in their role as adjudicators and as not being "real judges" The attorneys may assume that hearing officers will not properly rule on a case because they lack the legal expertise. Officers may experience this as conflict because they perceive that the attorneys do not believe that they are capable of deliberating the cases even though they are working hard to be equitable. Additionally, a power differential may exist between these attorneys and the hearing officers in the hearing process. The officers have a responsibility to control the hearing, and the attorneys' behavior may be perceived as

trying to disregard the power. Another consideration is that attorneys are being paid for their services, and extensive arguments may add time to their appearance and increase their billable service hours. Because attorneys have the duty of advocating for their clients' best interests, the behavior of some may be reflective of their overtly client-centric role, or focusing so much on the client winning a case that they exhibit behavior that might be considered as unethical, unprofessional, and disrespectful to hearing participants, including the adjudicator (Bassett, 2005; Gaetke, 2006). If the officer has to get involved in managing behavior issues from both the appellants and their attorneys, it distracts them from their role in gathering pertinent case facts to deliberate on a case, which causes stress. Officers in this study claim to manage stress related to their interaction with attorneys by clarifying their role and redirecting them to focus on the hearing issue. Officers recognize that the appellants' attorneys are paid to argue on behalf of their clients' best interest and expect that their arguments may extend the hearing time but do not see the value of prolonging hearing proceedings with arguments.

### **Ambiguity**

Hearing officers' certainty about their role is evident in their reflections and responses to how they are expected to carry out their roles. On the other hand, hearing officers report experiencing ambiguity when they lack specific knowledge about a situation needed to inform a decision. For example, they recognize the need for specialized information regarding medical issues where they are expected to decipher medical terminology in order to determine if a treatment or procedure is necessary in order to be covered under Medicaid. Lack of knowledge about such a condition reduces the chances of their being able to inquire about a situation in a manner that would increase their understanding or secure necessary information to inform their decisions.

Officers also indicate ambiguity when it is difficult to obtain case facts, or the truth about what

happened with a case is it with or in a case. Generally pertinent case facts are attained by reviewing evidence such as documents submitted by appellants or the department as well as testimony from all of the parties. The lack of factual information in reviewing evidence affects officers' confidence in correctly applying law and policy because they are unclear about what information is true. Officers place considerable value on being fair and explain that missing or conflicting information impedes their ability to deliver due process, or in essence do their jobs efficiently.

### **Organizational Climate**

Most of the participants express experiencing the organizational climate in a negative manner, including poor morale. These views seem to reflect confusion and frustration with the frequent changes agencies must make as a result of continuous legislative mandates. Front-line staff have to constantly adapt service procedures and delivery methods to accommodate these policy shifts, resulting in feeling stressed and overwhelmed (Lurie, 2006). For example, one participant observed that "workers are frustrated and pushed to the limit where they do not care." Hearing officers' express similar sentiments on how legislative mandates impact their feelings and the manner in which they carry out their jobs. Some studies suggest that the tenor of an organization's climate is reflected in the quality of service delivery and worker morale (Glisson, 2007; Glisson & James, 2002). Taken together, these concepts suggest that participants' pessimistic attitudes are not a statement about their agencies, but rather a response to the lack of control in their jobs. Since governmental agencies are subject to legislative oversight, which includes policy changes they must implement, it is advantageous to provide staff with support in the management of service delivery under these conditions.

Because welfare programs are funded through government sources, their functions become hot topics among policy makers and constituents. Social welfare policy is often the function of the

conservatism of the culture at the time, and who should shoulder its burden is constantly debated (Karger & Stoesz, 2013). Public debate about welfare funding, which usually results in cuts in programs and services, results in agency staff feeling uncertain about job security. Some findings suggest that work attitudes and culture are associated with staff turnover, sustainability of new programs, service quality, and outcomes (Aarons & Sawitzky, 2006; Glisson, 2002; Kirsh, 2000). The success of welfare agencies providing help to vulnerable clients hinges on the efforts of the staff providing these services. Welfare work is highly influenced by societal and policy changes and staff have to be prepared for the changes that occur in these agencies.

The second theme that arose was based on how policy changes appear to impede officers' sense of autonomy. Discretion, or being able to function independently, is an important function of hearing officials and considered the hallmark of their professional role (Lens, 2012). If officers lack autonomy, and are unable to exercise discretion in doing their jobs, negative feelings about their agencies may result. Autonomy is important to hearing officers. It empowers them in their ability to exercise discretion in conducting hearings and strengthens their role identity. It appears that allowing hearing officers to exercise discretion increases their willingness to implement welfare policy as "street level bureaucrats" (Meyers & Vorsanger, 2003; Sandfort, 2000) to ensure fairness to all parties. Officers must be allowed discretion to maximize their ability to administer justice to appellants.

Despite a negative view of their agency's climate, an interesting finding is that a majority of the participants feel a sense of cohesion within their units. This connection seems to provide a sense of protection against the "ebb and flow" of chaos often associated with the organization. The hearing unit appears to be a place where they were confident about their roles and experienced mutual support. Some studies have shown that social support acts as a buffer to work stress (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapaport, 2006). Officers report being able to consult with each other regarding policy changes which

affect their deliberation issues. For example, one hearing officer commented, “I usually consult with my peers on issues that I may not have dealt with before but they have, and get insight.” This cohesion may be attributed to the fact that hearing officers are a separate unit within the larger organization.

Although the study did not include a question on officers’ physical location in the organization, some hearing officers are physically housed in a different location than their agency. If officers perceive themselves as operating separately from the rest of the agency, a “division”, although not explicitly identified, may exist between officers and agency staff. This may indirectly create the resistance perceived by officers from staff related to hearings. Another possibility is that agency workers may not be clear about the hearing officers’ role, which might contribute to workers’ resistance in hearings, because they simply do not understand the process. It is difficult to understand the importance of one’s job responsibility if it is not explained. Agencies should create opportunities for staff and hearing officers to work together through training and workshops so that they better understand and appreciate each other’s roles, and how each role is pertinent in the hearing process.

The administrative hearings process provides a grievance procedure for clients to seek redress in obtaining benefits and services. Officers help facilitate clients’ concerns in the pursuit of economic justice. The research questions did not address participants’ feelings about their roles as facilitators of social justice. Rather, this information was drawn from the researcher’s interpretation of the responses. While some hearing officers feel their role is procedural/task-oriented (scheduling hearings, conducting the hearing, mailing correspondence, writing decisions), others describe their role as advocates of justice, understanding the importance of hearing both sides and allowing clients to be heard. Officers express their desire to do the right thing by conducting fair and impartial hearings; listening to, and placing equal value on, both sides. Participants often describe the hearings platform as a “sounding board” for clients who often feel powerless against welfare agencies (Brodkin, 2007; Neubeck &

Cazenave, 2001). In an effort to allow clients to voice their concerns about issues related to their cases, some officers permit clients to share their feelings and experiences in hearings even when they discuss things unrelated to the hearing issue.

These experiences address the concepts of procedural and substantive fairness. Procedural fairness is the practice of administering justice in legal proceedings and how individuals perceive fairness in the process (Tyler, 1990). Examples of this are the steps that the hearing officer takes in conducting the hearing by informing individuals of their rights, allowing the appellants to defend their cases and review evidence and ask questions about actions taken, the basic procedures in a hearing. Substantive fairness is the duty of the decision-maker to deliberate fairly on a case in order to develop conclusions in their decisions. After listening to parties in a hearing and collecting evidence, the hearing officer must then determine whether or not the welfare agency's action were valid based on policy and fair based on the agency's consideration of all aspects of the appellant's situation in taking action. For example, if the agency discontinued a person's Food Stamp benefits because they quit their job, the hearing officer must determine if the agency fairly evaluated the reason why the person quit their job and if there were other factors that were involved.

During the interviews, participants were not directly asked what they perceived as fairness, but their responses demonstrate their desire to ensure fairness. This is conceptualized by behaviors involving active listening. Officers believe these behaviors promote an environment of "fairness", which appears to address procedural fairness. Officers value "hearing both sides" in order to gather information so that case facts are ascertained and formulated into their decision-making. Participants underscore the significance of being fair. Many share that they wanted to "provide clients with a fair shake" to facilitate their full participation in hearings, recognizing that clients are not often afforded that opportunity. Studies have shown that in legal proceedings, when an official shows respect for an

appellant by allowing them to state their case and be heard, it influences the appellant's perceptions of fairness (Cascardi, Poythress, & Hall, 2001; Lind & Tyler, 1988).

## **Education and Training**

The matter of education and training was seen when hearing officers explained how they perceive how both influence their opinions about their jobs. A common belief among them is that education and training impact their performance on and attitude about their jobs. Some participants related that a combination of their degree and prior experience with eligibility work increased their job competencies. A small number of officers espouse an interesting phenomena that is that personal experiences with welfare enhance their awareness of client's issues who face tough economic circumstances.

Regarding educational training, hearing officers report the benefits of having taken human and social services courses during their educational pursuits. Degrees in social services disciplines explore different aspects of human behavior in various contexts in order to help people enhance their quality of life and meet their basic human needs. For example, a degree in social work provides one with the competencies and knowledge to work with vulnerable populations in different contexts such as courts, welfare offices, and in their communities to help them achieve economic and social justice (NASW, 1996).

A number of the hearing officers credit the discipline of writing assignments in college as a significant factor in helping them with one of the most important tasks of their job—writing the hearing decision. Studies suggest that good writing habits, and mastering writing assignments in college, help prepare students for writing effective memos, essays, and reports in their future jobs (Santrock & Halonen, 2008). It is noteworthy that a well-written hearing decision can endure scrutiny and hold up if



appealed to a higher court. The Human Capital Theory asserts that education provides workers with skills that increase their productivity on the job (Becker, 1994; Kern, 2009).

It seems logical that prior experience with eligibility programs, and familiarity with policy would increase officers' competence in conducting welfare hearings. Several of them reported that prior eligibility experience helped in understanding specific agency policies and asking the appropriate questions to obtain the best information to inform decision-making. An officer who is conducting a hearing on a program for which they have prior eligibility experience can quickly determine if there was an error made in the application of policy and if procedures were handled correctly.

Hearing officers rely heavily on their peers for training and support on the job. Forrest & Peterson (2006) purports that employees on a job are essentially adult learners who will require different kinds of training and development throughout their careers. Adults bring their life experiences and knowledge to their learning opportunities. Additionally, officers indicate that the agency provides specialized training around administrative law procedures and how to conduct hearings. These trainings are facilitated by attorneys. This is important because officers frequently work with attorneys, and attorneys represent appellants and on occasions others such as the agency worker and other interested parties involved in a hearing matter. Hearing officers can gain insight into reasons for stances taken by attorneys, from being adversarial to collaborative to educational when representing their clients in the hearing process. Some studies have shown that the collaboration of law with social welfare increases understanding between attorneys and social workers for the benefit of clients (Galowitz, 1999; Weil, 1982). The hearings process provides a unique opportunity to witness social welfare process and the law integrated in practice to benefit clients.

Most of the hearing officers recognize NAHO as a source for education, training, and support to those who conduct administrative hearings. They credit NAHO with providing useful training on

evidentiary review and due process. Officers also spoke highly of a course offered related to maintaining proper conduct and control of hearings. Its membership includes both hearing officers and administrative law judges.

The life experience of a few participants impacts their understanding of the appellant and how it impacts the hearing process. For example, one participant shared how her family received financial assistance when she was a child following the death of a parent and how helpful it was to their family. This personal experience enhanced the person's empathy towards those who find themselves in unforeseen economic hardship and how she can relate to those who face similar situations.

### **Other elements**

Officers did not express that their work is impacted by life or environmental conditions. Participants believe that their work and home responsibilities were similar to other professionals who have to find a balance between work and other life situations. It is possible that participants are not forthright regarding specific personal family issues. Qualitative research involves the researcher facilitating self-disclosure from participants by establishing rapport. Individuals may not open up and provide limited information that they later regret (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007; Kvale, 1996). Officers report employing strategies to keep "both worlds" separate, such as using the commute time home to transition from one role to the other. This has been described as a "corridor" to transition one from work to home (Kinman, McDowell, & Uys, 2014).

Though not significant but interesting is that several respondents indicate that personal experiences with welfare enhance their awareness of clients' issues who face tough economic circumstances. Research has shown that agency workers that have received welfare benefits in the past are more understanding and empathetic with clients, because they have "been there" (Watkins-Hayes,

2009). The appellants' experiences with financial hardship are salient for the officer because he or she understands their predicament.

## Chapter Five

### IMPLICATIONS

This study explored hearing officers within welfare organizations and their role perceptions because nothing was found in the various literature bases such as EBSCOHost, PSYCInfo, or JSTOR about them. A focus of the study was hearing officers with human services degrees, particularly social work. It was hypothesized that because one of the core values of the social work profession is advocating for social justice for the powerless and disenfranchised (NASW Code of Ethics, 1996), that social workers' skills and interests are compatible with the work of the hearing officer. Additionally, the researcher is a social worker and hearing officer and wanted to know how others with a social work degree experienced their role as hearing officers. The procedures chosen to secure the study did not produce social workers. Nevertheless, this study provides an exploratory analysis of the role perceptions of hearing officers with social services degrees.

This chapter concludes with inferences about the demographic characteristics, concepts of role conflict and ambiguity, organizational climate and professional training from this study and its limitations. Additionally, the study's relevance to social work research, practice, and education are discussed.

**demographic characteristics.** Hearing officers in this study represent eight states across the country, with a majority of them on the east coast and affiliated with the National Association of Hearing Officials (NAHO). The majority of participants are white middle-aged Caucasian females holding a bachelor's degree, all working for state agencies, which makes the sample homogenous. Only 18.5 percent of the participants were persons of color, including African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. Of these, 3.7 percent were males and only one was bilingual. Human services agency employees are overrepresented by women (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014), and a disproportionate

number of women make up the population of welfare clients (Hasenfeld, 2007; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). Eligibility work is a female-dominated profession and statistics represent that large numbers of these workers are women of color (Lurie, 2001). There were more women represented in the study sample than men and but less than 19% of these were women of color. Because of the limited sample size, one cannot infer that the study is representative of hearing officers. Moreover, a larger sample size might include more hearing officers who are women of color.

**role conflict.** Hearing officers in this study report experiencing conflict as a result of competing expectations between agency staff, appellants, and their attorneys for officers to rule favorably in their position. This causes stress for the officers because of their belief that they are fair in their decision-making, but are perceived as not fair no matter how they rule. Given that the data suggest that hearing officers more frequently than not rule in favor of the appellants, the agency representatives will be disappointed. Agency staff sometimes respond to their perception of the hearing officers' pro-appellant attitude through resistant behavior such as not showing up for the hearing. This suggests that agency staff do not fully understand the role of the hearing officer.

Hearing officers experience conflict based on the appellants' expectations that officers can change policy to accommodate their needs or overturn policy to rule in their favor. Appellants, like agency staff, will also experience disappointment when officers rule unfavorably to them, and their perceptions often stem from preconceived attitudes that the agency works against them. Despite the combative behavior that is exhibited by the appellants, their attorneys, or the agency staff, hearing officers are charged with adjudicating in hearings, in that they have to make judgments and rule based on policy.

The implication of these findings is that agencies might benefit from providing regular training for their employees about the administrative hearings process and the role of the hearing officer. This

training may help clarify the officers' role, which may help agency employees better prepare for hearings. Agency employees must understand the hearing officers' responsibility to conduct fair hearings, which is not always experienced as a collaborative process. Agencies may develop standardized training materials that include information about the administrative hearings process to be used with new employees. Another option is that agencies may separate hearing officers from organizational influences by housing them separately from the main agency. There has been some push to encourage states to operate an independent hearings agency, similarly to the central panel model with administrative law judges. For example, in Connecticut, there was an effort spearheaded by a prominent legal aid attorney to push legislation for Connecticut to develop an independent hearings agency because of allegations that Department of Social Services hearing officers are not acting independently in their decision-making and that hearing supervisors and attorneys are making hearing decisions and not the officers (New Haven Legal Assistance Association, 2005). Agencies should also place high priority on helping hearing officers to adapt stress management techniques that could be applied when conducting hearings.

Findings from this study suggest that officers experience conflict related to constant changes to policies and procedures because of legislative directives. Constant adaptation is required to keep up with and manage these in order to make informed and fair decisions. Agencies might help officers to cope more effectively by communicating information and support for them through various media such as agency-wide bulletins, emails, and training opportunities such as webinars and conference attendance. Hearing officers may use informal interactions such as speaking with their peers and supervisors in a collegial and consultative capacity around change, and create a central location within their units to keep updated policy information.

**role ambiguity.** Study findings suggest that officers need expertise in specific program areas so

that they may be confident in their decision-making. For example, some hearing officers have to make decisions related to child support issues or Medicaid eligibility or determine the medical necessity for a treatment procedure, both of which can be complex. Not having the necessary knowledge in these situations may weigh heavily on an officer because they have to make a ruling that will significantly impact a person's physical and mental well-being.

Organizational policies and resources related to ongoing training are vital for hearing officers to maintain their skills and competencies, possibly reducing some of the ambiguity experienced in conducting their jobs. Agencies could provide medical consultants that can be called upon to consult with them when needed. Most welfare agencies hire doctors and other medically-trained staff to assist in the administration of Medicaid or contract with private companies to review client records to determine if they are disabled and qualify for Medicaid (Takach, 2011). Possibly these persons could be available to staff and hearing officers to answer questions related to medical issues. Agencies receive monies from the federal government to administer the Medicaid program in their respective states. Possibly they could request funding from these sources for advanced training for hearing officers as part of administrative costs associated in administering the program.

**organizational climate.** Research findings from the study suggest that hearing officers are frustrated with the changes related to legislative decisions that affect agency policy and procedures. They have to keep up with them in order to do their job. It is contradictory because although officers dislike all of the changes, they understand the predicament of the agency and are committed to their jobs. Seemingly, they have ways to manage the related stress by being mutually supportive to each other. Agencies might take a clue from how the officers interact with each other in their units and replicate a similar environment agency-wide.

**professional training.** One of the biggest surprises of the study is that none of the study

participants identified as having social work education or training. All participants had degrees in a particular social services discipline, mostly being in human services and psychology with 5 each, or about 18 percent.

Another revelation is that they have limited preparation in conducting administrative hearings. Their training includes shadowing peers by observing them conduct hearings, reviewing sample decision templates, and listening to audio recordings of hearings. The National Association of Hearing Officials (NAHO) is the primary outside source for training, and all respondents participate in some type of NAHO training but membership in the organization is not mandatory because most agencies do not require it.

### **Limitations**

The sample in this study was small ( $n=27$ ) due to the study design, difficulty in locating welfare hearing officers and the desire to carry it out in an established time frame. Titles and location of welfare hearing officers vary across states, and there is no central database that provides information about where welfare hearing officers are located. Though this study establishes a foundation for conducting future research on the subject matter, no conclusions can be drawn from it that can be generalized beyond this endeavor.

The fact that the researcher is a welfare hearing officer and a social worker served as both a limitation and as a benefit to this study. The limitation is that she may have experienced challenges in her ability to analyze and interpret the interview data without prejudgment or forcing predetermined explanations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). She is considered an “insider”, or a member of the population being studied. However, the benefit was that because of her professional connection to the sample, she was able to understand the role and establish trust among participants to promote truth telling (Bonner &



Tolurst, 2002). Her identity also aided her in locating welfare hearing officers for the study, which may have been more challenging had she not had connections to the population.

Additionally, the researcher interviewed 6 people who know her because they work for the same agency in the same role. She recognizes that it may have created blurred boundaries between herself and the participants or they may have overdisclosed information or divulge information they may later regret because it places them in a vulnerable situation (Kvale, 1996). Participants expressed interest in participating in the study through the recruitment methods conducted with the NAHO membership list. Additionally, her known status aided her in establishing rapport quicker and communicating with the officers in a way that may have been more challenging had she not been known to the officers, and this allowed her unique access into their thoughts and feelings, valuable in this study design (Labaree, 2002). She managed her subjectivity in her research by checking in regularly with her dissertation chair to process her gut level feelings and the emergent themes from the interviews.

Finally, the fact that the researcher alone collected and categorized information from the study participants is another limitation. With no oversight on reliability, except for self-imposed checks and balances, the conclusions are exploratory and speculative. The only sources of data used were the interviews, which caused the researcher to focus on the lived experience as reported by the subjects instead of the social process (Benoliel, 1996).

### **Relevance to social work research**

This research is significant to social work in that it begins the investigation of the role perceptions among welfare hearing officer, an area that has received little attention in the social welfare research and within the context of social welfare administration. It is the first known study to provide demographic information about this population, as well as document how these individuals feel about

their jobs, their experiences of conflict and ambiguity, and how their professional training influences their job experiences.

Concurrently it is the first known attempts at examining the experiences of welfare hearing officers with human services and social work degrees. The fact that the study located hearing officers with social science degrees is noteworthy. This study may be used as the basis for studies that seek to provide an in-depth description of hearing officers and explanation of their role perceptions. Eventually leading to a more rigorous study with a larger sample size that includes social workers, as well as a study that provides comparisons between human services and social work-trained hearing officers.

### **Relevance to social work practice**

This study can be used to acquaint social workers with the job of the hearing officer and explain the trajectory one might take to become a hearing officer. It can also be utilized to illustrate how the role of a hearing officer is compatible with the social work profession's value base related to its pursuit to advance the concept of social and economic justice for all people, particularly the disenfranchised and underrepresented (NASW, 1996). Social work training and education emphasize the development of skills such as advocating, empathy, problem solving, and effective listening (Kirst-Ashman, 2013) —all important skills in conducting welfare hearings. Moreover, these skills helps the social worker to aid the client in navigating the welfare maze that they often see as being adversarial and unsupportive. It demonstrates how the role of the hearing officer can be compatible with the social worker's professional responsibility to advocate for the clients. Advocacy in this situation refers to overseeing a process that guarantees that the client is given due process in the consideration of public assistance benefits for which he/she may be entitled. Additionally, the hearing officer is positioned to advance social work's mandates on human rights, within the context of welfare that individuals have the right to adequate food,

shelter, and healthcare, for which the officer protects in ensuring fairness in hearings. As hearing officers, individuals acquire practice knowledge and experiences related to the implementation of social welfare policies and special skills that permits the integration of law and social services and possibly leading to the obtaining a law degree as a companion to social work in practice.

### **Relevance to social work education**

This study may be used to enhance the interests of undergraduate and graduate social work students in the administrative hearings process. Including this information in introductory social welfare courses may expand the knowledge base of processes within public assistance administration, particularly one that provides redress for persons seeking welfare benefits. Increased understanding of how hearing officers can help clients could enhance students' perceptions more positively about relationships between workers and clients in welfare organizations. It may advance their grasp of how social work and law can be integrated in ways that benefit clients.

### **Future research**

Future research should involve using this study as a foundation incorporating more rigorous methods to determine if there are social workers that are hearing officers. Comparisons could then be made, or differences identified, between those with social work degrees versus non-social work degrees regarding their role perceptions. The research should also be expanded to examine social work and/or social services-trained hearing officers and administrative law judges who conduct welfare hearings, to see if any comparisons may be made regarding their role perceptions. Since this study establishes a foundation in which to direct future research, future studies may be conducted to examine whether role perceptions are related to particular characteristics of welfare hearing officers and if those differences

are important in how these valuable actors in welfare administration manage their jobs of ensuring economic justice for oppressed individuals seeking financial redress through the administrative hearings process.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**IRB-1 Approval**



**DATE:** September 3, 2014

**TO:** Edna Comer, Ph.D.  
 Karen Brown, Student Investigator  
 School of Social Work

**FROM:** Bandana Purkayastha, Ph.D.  
 Institutional Review Board Member  
 FWA# 00007125

**RE:** Protocol #H14-222: "Hearing Officers' Perceptions of Their Roles in Welfare Organizations"  
*Please refer to the Protocol# in all future correspondence with the IRB.*  
 Funding Source: Investigator Out-of-Pocket  
*Approval Period: From: **September 3, 2014** Valid Through: **September 3, 2015***  
*"Expiration Date"*

On August 27, 2014, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed the above-referenced research study by expedited review and determined that modifications were required to secure approval. Those requirements have been met, and the IRB granted approval of the study on September 3, 2014. The research presents no more than minimal risk to human subjects and qualifies for expedited approval under category #7: Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Enclosed is the validated information sheet, which is valid through September 3, 2015. **A copy of the approved, validated consent form (with the IRB's stamp) must be used to consent each subject.**

Per 45 CFR 46.117(c)(2), the IRB waived the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for the subjects because it found that the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context. The principal investigator must notify the IRB immediately of any changes that may affect the status of the research study referenced above.

All investigators at the University of Connecticut are responsible for complying with the attached IRB "Responsibilities of Research Investigators."

**Re-approval:** It is the investigator's responsibility to apply for re-approval of ongoing research at **least once yearly**, or more often if specified by the IRB. The Re-approval/Completion Form (IRB-2) and other applicable re-approval materials must be submitted **one month** prior to the expiration date noted above.

Modifications: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, the investigators, or funding source, please submit the changes in writing to the IRB using the Amendment Review Form (IRB-3). All modifications must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to initiation.

Audit: All protocols approved by the IRB may be audited by the Post Approval Monitor.

*Please keep this letter with your copy of the approved protocol.*

Attachments:

1. Validated Information Sheet
2. Validated Recruitment Materials
3. Validated Appendix A
4. Validated IRB-1
5. “Responsibilities of Research Investigators”

**APPENDIX B****Consent Letter from the National Association of Hearing Officials****NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF HEARING  
OFFICIALS**

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**P.O. Box 100  
Hebron, CT 06248**

January 15, 2014

To: Karen Brown

Dear Ms. Brown:

It was a pleasure to meet you at our annual conference and to hear about your doctoral research. You will recall that the board approved your request to contact individual NAHO members for voluntary interviews about the administrative hearing process as part of your research with a focus on the role of stress and strain hearing officers experience as they conduct hearings. During those interviews you would inform the members of the purpose of the survey, describe your study, review the protocols for confidentiality and explain NAHO's role in providing assistance. Following the completion of the surveys we understand that you will work with NAHO members and officers to determine the best method by which to disseminate the results of your research. NAHO acknowledges that participation in the study is voluntary and that NAHO members are free to withdraw from it at any time without suffering any penalties from NAHO relative to membership status or other privileges.

As president of NAHO I support the organization's involvement in this project and will be happy to work with you on it to the extent that my time and other duties allow and I eagerly anticipate reading your findings and conclusions.

Best regards,

*Norm*

Norman J. Patenaude  
President



## APPENDIX C

### Recruitment Phone Script

*Hello, may I speak with XYZ please?-*

*Good [morning/afternoon]. My name is Karen Brown and I am a doctoral student at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. I have sent you out a couple of emails regarding a research study that I am conducting as part of my dissertation study and I am making a follow up phone call to you to request your participation. I am reaching out to you because you have been identified as a hearing officer that conducts welfare hearings. My research study is about hearing officers and their role perceptions in the welfare hearings process. There is such limited information out there about hearing officers and the important roles they play, your insights on your job perceptions are valuable.*

*You are eligible to participate if you are a hearing officer, a member of the National Association of Hearing Officials, and you conduct public assistance hearings (i.e TANF, Medicaid, SNAP/Food Stamps, childcare assistance, child support, etc.). Do you meet these criteria? **[If “yes”, continue below; if “no” – I apologize for the misunderstanding. Sorry to take up your time. Have a nice day.]***

*Participation in this research includes answering some non-identifying facts about yourself and questions about your job perspectives and the agencies where you work. If you agree to participate in the interview, it will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour of your time .You will receive a \$15.00 gift card of your choice to either Starbucks or Dunkin' Donuts for your time and effort.*

*Your participation is completely voluntary. I know you have a busy schedule and I greatly appreciate your consideration of my request. Can I set up an appointment with you to do the interview?*

*If you have any questions, you may contact me by email at karen.brown@uconn.edu or by telephone at (860) 478-3476. My research will be supervised by my dissertation chair, Dr. Edna Comer, Ph.D., who is an Associate Professor at the school. She may be reached at (860) 570-9117, or by email at edna.comer@uconn.edu. The mailing address is 1798 Asylum Avenue, West Hartford, CT 06117.*

*This study is approved by the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board.*

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Introductory Email**

Hello -

My name is Karen Brown and I am a doctoral student at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. I am requesting your participation in my dissertation research study on hearing officers' perceptions of their roles in the welfare hearings process. Because there is such limited information out there about hearing officers and the important roles they play, I am interested in gaining your insights on your perceptions about your jobs.

You are eligible to participate if you are a hearing officer, a member of the National Association of Hearing Officials, and you conduct public assistance hearings (i.e. TANF, Medicaid, SNAP/Food Stamps, childcare assistance, child support, etc.).

You will be asked to provide information by answering some non-identifying facts about yourself and questions about your job perspectives and the agencies where you work. Your participation to this study is important because hearing officers are different across states and I want to capture your unique experiences. The hope is that your input will provide direction in looking at ways for hearing officers to better manage their jobs as well as introducing the job as a potential career choice for social work students. You will receive a \$15.00 gift card of your choice to either Starbucks or Dunkin' Donuts for your time and effort.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour of your time. I know how busy you are and I greatly appreciate your consideration of my request.

If you have any questions, you may contact me by email at karen.brown@uconn.edu or by telephone at (860) 478-3476. This study will be under the direct supervision of Dr. Edna Comer, Ph.D., Associate Professor, University of Connecticut School of Social Work. She may be contacted by phone at (860) 570-9117, or by email at edna.comer@uconn.edu. The mailing address is 1798 Asylum Avenue, West Hartford, CT 06117.

This study is approved by the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely,

Karen Brown, MSW

## APPENDIX E

### Recruitment Flyer

University of Connecticut

## STUDY PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!

Hearing officers' perceptions of their roles in welfare organizations

I am recruiting participants for a study about hearing officers and their perceptions about their roles in conducting welfare hearings. During this study you will be asked to answer some demographic and training questions, your feelings about your role as a hearing officer and about the organizations where you work. Information gathered from the research is confidential and should take approximately 45 minutes of your time.

To be eligible to participate, you must be employed as a hearing officer, conduct welfare hearings for programs such as SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, child support, etc., and have at least a bachelor's degree in social work or a social-services related discipline (i.e. anthropology, criminology, human services, psychology, sociology, etc.)

You will receive a \$15.00 gift card to Starbucks or Dunkin' Donuts for completing the interviews.

The interviews will be conducted over the telephone or in person. For more information and to set up an interview, please contact the researcher, Karen Brown at (860) 478-3476 or by email at [karen.brown@uconn.edu](mailto:karen.brown@uconn.edu).

This research is conducted under the direction of Edna Comer, Ph.D., University of Connecticut School of Social Work.

## **APPENDIX F**

### **First Recruitment Email**

Hello -

My name is Karen Brown and I am a doctoral student at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. You have been identified as a hearing officer who conducts welfare hearings. I am reaching out to you specifically and requesting your participation in a research study on hearing officers and their role perceptions in the welfare hearings process. Because there is such limited information out there about hearing officers and the important roles they play, I am interested in gaining your insights on your perceptions about your jobs.

You are eligible to participate if you are a hearing officer, a member of the National Association of Hearing Officials, and you conduct public assistance hearings (i.e. TANF, Medicaid, SNAP/Food Stamps, childcare assistance, child support, etc.).

You will be asked to provide information by answering some non-identifying facts about yourself and questions about your job perspectives and the agencies where you work. Your participation is important because hearing officers are different across states and I want to capture your unique experiences. The hope is that your input will provide direction in looking at ways for hearing officers to better manage their jobs as well as introducing the job as a potential career choice for social work students. You will receive a \$15.00 gift card of your choice to either Starbucks or Dunkin' Donuts for your time and effort.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour of your time. I know you have a busy schedule and I greatly appreciate your consideration of my request.

If you have any questions, you may contact me by email at karen.brown@uconn.edu or by telephone at (860) 478-3476. This study will be under the direct supervision of Dr. Edna Comer, Ph.D., Associate Professor, and University of Connecticut School of Social Work. She may be contacted by phone at (860) 570-9117, or by email at edna.comer@uconn.edu. The mailing address is 1798 Asylum Avenue, West Hartford, CT 06117.

This study is approved by the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely,

Karen Brown, MSW

## APPENDIX G

### **Informed Consent Form**



**Principal Investigator:** Edna Comer, Ph.D.

**Student Researcher:** Karen Brown, MSW

**Study Title:** Hearing officers' perceptions of their roles in welfare organizations:  
Role conflict, ambiguity, organizational climate, and professional training

#### Introduction

Hello, my name is Karen Brown and you have been invited to participate in a research study on hearing officers and their role perceptions in the welfare hearings process. You are being asked to participate because you are a hearing officer and your thoughts about your job are important in this study.

#### Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this research study is to gain knowledge about who hearing officers are and their perceptions of their jobs. The welfare hearings process is an important part of the welfare system. However, there is little information known about the hearing officers who conduct welfare hearings and this study proposes to shed light on these workers.

#### What are the study procedures? What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to provide some general demographic information including your education experience and then you will be asked a series of questions about how you became a hearing officer, feelings about your roles, questions about your organization, and training you received as part of your job.

The research will be conducted over the phone and will take approximately 45 minutes to complete. You will not be contacted in the future.

This interview will be recorded; you may choose not to have your interview recorded.

#### What are the risks or inconveniences of the study?

We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, a possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the study.

### What are the benefits of the study?

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study may inform individuals about hearing officers and direct future research.

### Will I receive payment for participation? Are there costs to participate?

There is no cost to you for participation. You will be compensated with a \$15.00 gift card of your choice to either Starbucks or Dunkin' Donuts for your time.

### How will my personal information be protected?

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your data. The researchers will keep all study records (including any codes to your data) locked in a secure location. Research records will be labeled with a code. The code will be derived from a number a sequential 3 digit code that reflects how many people have enrolled in the study. A master key that links names and codes will be maintained in a separate and secure location. The master key and audiotapes will be destroyed after 5 years. All electronic files (e.g., database, spreadsheet, etc.) containing identifiable information will be password protected. Any computer hosting such files will also have password protection to prevent access by unauthorized users. Only the members of the research staff will have access to the passwords. Data that will be shared with others will be coded as described above to help protect your identity. At the conclusion of this study, the researchers may publish their findings. Data may be released to the National Association of Hearing Officials in collective form and no personal identifying information will be released. Information will be presented in summary format and you will not be identified in any publications or presentations.

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality. Your confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Specifically, no guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties.

You should also know that the UConn Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Research Compliance Services may inspect study records as part of its auditing program, but these reviews will only focus on the researchers and not on your responses or involvement. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

### Can I stop being in the study and what are my rights?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer.

You may be withdrawn from the study at any time for missed appointments, non-adherence to procedures, and disruptive behavior during study procedures, adverse reactions, etc.

### Whom do I contact if I have questions about the study?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any questions you have about this study. If you have further questions about this study or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the principal investigator, Dr. Edna Comer, Ph.D. at (860) 570-9117 or the student researcher, Karen Brown, MSW at (860) 478-3476. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 860-486-8802.

### **Documentation of Consent:**

Do you consent to participate in this study?

## **APPENDIX H**

### **Verbal Informed Consent Documentation**

SUBJECT: *Welfare hearing officers' role perceptions: Role conflict, ambiguity, organizational climate and professional training*

This consent serves as documentation that the required elements of informed consent have been presented orally to the participant or the participant's legally authorized representative by using the below telephone consent script.

Verbal consent to participate in this telephone survey has been obtained by the below investigator on the below date documenting the participant's willingness to continue with the telephone survey.

---

Karen Brown, MSW, Investigator

---

Signature

---

Date



## APPENDIX I

### HEARINGS QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer the following questions below in the context of the organization where you currently conduct hearings.

1. What is your age range? (check one):
  - ☐ 21-30
  - ☐ 31-40
  - ☐ 41-50
  - ☐ 51-60
  - ☐ 61-65
  - ☐ 66+
  
2. Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose one)
  - ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
  - ☐ Black/African American
  - ☐ White/Caucasian
  - ☐ Asian/other Pacific Islander
  - ☐ Multiple ethnicity/other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Are you Hispanic or Latino/a? ☐ Yes ☐ No
  
4. What is your gender?
  - ☐ Male
  - ☐ Female
  - ☐ Transgender
  
5. Which job title best describes your current position?
  - ☐ Fair Hearings Officer
  - ☐ Hearing Officer
  - ☐ Lead Hearing Officer
  - ☐ Mediator
  - ☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. In what state do you currently work? \_\_\_\_\_
  
7. What is the month and year you became a hearing officer?
 

\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_  
 Month                      Year
  
- 7a. Have you been working as a hearing officer continually since this date? ☐ Yes ☐ No
  
8. What level of government do you work for?
  - ☐ State

\_\_\_County  
\_\_\_Municipal

9. How long have you worked with your current organization?

\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_  
years months

10. Are you employed by the same agency that administers benefits? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No

*If "no", go to question 10a; if "yes", skip to question 10c*

10a. Are you employed with a contractor agency to conduct hearings? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No

*If "yes", skip to question 11; if "no", skip to question 10c*

10b. Are you employed as a private contractor to conduct hearings? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No

*Proceed to question 11*

10c. Where is the hearing unit located?

\_\_\_Within the same agency  
\_\_\_Outside of the agency administering benefits

11. For what type of programs do you conduct hearing? (check all that apply)

\_\_\_ Aid to the Disabled/State Supplement  
\_\_\_ Child support  
\_\_\_ Daycare assistance  
\_\_\_ Medicaid  
\_\_\_ Programs for the disabled and/or elderly (Meals on Wheels,  
homemaker/nursing services, protective services, etc.)  
\_\_\_ Rental assistance  
\_\_\_ SNAP/Food Stamps  
\_\_\_ TANF/TFA  
\_\_\_ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

12. What type of degree(s) have you completed? (Check all that apply)

\_\_\_AA/AS  
\_\_\_BA/BS  
\_\_\_BSW  
\_\_\_MA/MS  
\_\_\_MSW  
\_\_\_JD  
\_\_\_Ph.D.  
\_\_\_Dual degree (specify degrees) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

13. What was your undergraduate major(s)? (Check all that apply)

\_\_\_ Anthropology  
\_\_\_ Criminology  
\_\_\_ Human Services

- ☐ Law
- ☐ Psychology
- ☐ Social Work
- ☐ Sociology
- ☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

14. If you have a graduate degree, check all that apply.

- ☐ Anthropology
- ☐ Human Services
- ☐ Law
- ☐ Psychology
- ☐ Marriage and Family Therapy
- ☐ Social Work
- ☐ Sociology
- ☐ Public Administration
- ☐ Public Health
- ☐ Public Policy
- ☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX J

### Interview Guide

***Hello!** I am Karen Brown, a doctoral student at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work in West Hartford, CT. I am conducting research on hearing officers' perceptions of their roles in welfare hearings.*

*If you agree, I would like to ask you some questions about your journey to becoming a hearing officer, about your experiences with the organization for which you conduct hearings and questions about your education and training. I would also like to share with you that I am also a hearing officer that conducts welfare hearings. This research has no known risks. Your participation will involve one informal interview that will last approximately 45 minutes. Your responses are confidential and you will not be identified in your answers. Notes that are taken from the interview will be stored in a secure location.*

*Do you have any questions about the research project? I will be documenting your consent to participate. Would it be all right if I audiotaped our interview? Saying no to audio recording will have no effect on the interview. May I proceed with the first question?*

I am going to begin the interviews with a few questions around your becoming a hearing officer.

1. First, tell why you became a hearing officer:

Probes:

Were you ready for a new challenge?  
Did someone suggest you apply?  
Did you have an interest in law?  
Did you want to become a lawyer?  
Was it a promotion or reassignment?

2. How did you become a hearing officer?

Probes:

Was there a posting for the position?  
Did you take an exam?  
Was it a transfer opportunity or reassignment?  
Did someone tell you about the position?

3. Tell me about your experiences with welfare programs prior to becoming a hearing officer.

Probes:

Did you work in the same agency before becoming a hearing officer?  
Did you work for another agency but in the welfare field?  
Did you work for another social services agency?  
What types of positions did you hold prior to your current job?  
Did you have personal or family experiences that were important to your work as a hearings officer?

Next, I am going to ask questions about the organization for which you conduct hearings.

4. In your role as a hearing officer, please describe the roles and duties you have.

Probes:

What are your expectations of your role?

What are the expectations that others have?

Tell me about an example of a situation where these expectations clashed with each other.

How did you handle this?

5. In hearing cases, what kinds of programs cause you the most difficulties?  
Why?
6. Staying with the subject of expectations, tell me about an experience where you felt unclear about your role as a hearing officer.  
Probe:  
How did you handle it?
7. What kinds of people that you deal with make the job hard?  
Probe:  
What kinds of issues make the job hard?
8. Are there things outside of the job that cause you stress?  
Probes: Family? Home life? Being a parent or caretaker?
9. Question for hearing officer that works for same agency: How would you describe the climate of the total organization?  
Probe:  
How do you feel about the climate of the unit in which you work?  
Is burnout a problem?  
Is change a problem?
- 8a. Question for hearing officer that works for contractor agency: How would you describe the climate of the organization for which you hold hearings?  
Probe: How would you describe the climate of the agency that employs you?  
Is burnout a problem?  
How does the hearing agency's climate impact your role as a hearing officer? What about your employing agency's climate?

Finally, I am going to ask you questions about things that prepared you as a hearing officer.

10. Are you in school now?  
Probe: what are you studying?
11. How did your education prepare you as a hearing officer?
12. What training did you have to prepare you to be a hearing officer?  
Probes:  
Welfare policy and procedures?  
Administrative law procedures?  
Conflict resolution/mediation?  
Bench skills?  
Due process?  
Rules of evidence?

No training?

13. When did you have these trainings?

Probes:

Within the first month? Six months? A year?

14. How was it done?

Probes:

Shadowing a colleague

Supervisor trained you

Agency provided

Outside contractor

15. Where did you receive training?

Probes:

At the agency

At a conference

At an outside facility

16. Have you participated in trainings offered by NAHO?

Probes: If so, which ones?

Which one(s) were most helpful?

17. What other organizations have provided outside training in which you have participated?

Probes:

National Association of Social Workers?

National Association of Administrative Law Judiciary?

National Judicial College?

American Bar Association?

*I want to thank you for your participation in this study and your feedback will provide valuable insight on how hearing officers perceive their job experiences.*

## **APPENDIX K**

### **Curriculum Vitae KAREN R. BROWN**

548 New Britain Avenue  
Hartford, CT 06106  
860.478.3476  
[bk987654@yahoo.com](mailto:bk987654@yahoo.com)

### **EDUCATION**

**Candidate, Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work**

University of Connecticut School of Social Work, West Hartford, CT 10/2015

Dissertation: "Doing the right thing amidst change": Hearing officers' perceptions of their roles in welfare organizations: Role conflict, ambiguity, organizational climate, and professional training"

**Master of Social Work**

University of Connecticut School of Social Work, West Hartford, CT 1998

**Bachelor of Arts, Psychology**

University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 1989

One of the founding members of the Minority Achievement Program in Psychology (MAPP) in the Psychology department.

### **RESEARCH INTERESTS**

- Social welfare policy analysis
- Participatory Action Research (PAR) strategies in urban communities
- Socioeconomic determinants of poverty and economic strategies
- Service Learning activities and outcomes among college students

### **PRIOR RESEARCH**

**Student Investigator, University of Connecticut School of Social Work, West Hartford, CT 2009-2010.**

- Conducted qualitative research via case study method of a TANF worker's experience at the Department of Social Services.
- Assisted in the creation of a survey instrument to be administered to seniors to address service delivery at local senior centers.

**Resident Investigator, Participatory Action Research Project, Cohort 2, Institute for Community Research, Hartford, CT, 2002-2003.**

- Examined civic engagement of residents in a Hartford neighborhood and explored differences of involvement between landlords who lived in the community and non-resident landlords.

## PUBLICATION

Williamson, K. W. & **Brown, K.** (2014). Collective Voices: Engagement of Hartford Community Residents through Participatory Action Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(72), 1-14.

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Western Connecticut State University, Danbury, CT

**Assistant Professor**

8/2015-present

Courses taught: Introduction to Social Welfare and Social Work Services  
Social Welfare as an Institution (Policy)  
Social Work Senior Field Practicum and Seminar

- Teach three 14-week courses each semester to students enrolled in the BSW program.
- Prepare curricula and develop study guides, midterm and final papers.
- Grade tests and assignments and monitor students' progress in the program.
- Advise students on their plan of study and other related concerns.
- Conduct field site visits with field instructors for assigned practicum students; monitor and evaluate their field placements.
- Work with department faculty on scholarship and other related initiatives.
- Plan events and activities for department's community outreach initiatives.
- Work with university-wide faculty, staff, and outside entities in establishing positive community partnerships.

Smith College School for Social Work, Northampton, MA

**Summer Adjunct Faculty**

7/2015-present

Course taught: Agency and Community Practice

- Teach 5-week accelerated course to MSW students in the program.
- Develop syllabus and overall course structure and content.
- Grade papers and assignments.
- Develop study guides, class exercises, and written assignments.
- Integrate Smith Moodle online learning technology, guest lecturers and audio/video/technology resources in class to enhance student learning.
- Perform student needs assessments and pre- and post- testing for teaching effectiveness/evaluation.

Simmons College School of Social Work, Boston, MA



**Part-time Section Instructor**, *SocialWork@Simmons* Master of Social Work Program  
2014-present

Course taught: Social Welfare Policies and Services

- Teach 14-week synchronous “live sessions” to social work students in the school’s full-time online MSW program.
- Create and manage online “classroom” using Adobe Connect videoconferencing software.
- Oversee asynchronous student activity such as reading assignments, discussions, podcasts, grading, and study groups.
- Develop study guides, videos, and other classroom material.
- Grade assignments and papers.
- Serve on course advisory panel to evaluate and enhance course objectives and outcome measures in compliance with CSWE requirements.

Connecticut Community Colleges System

**Part-time Instructor**

*Three Rivers Community College*, Norwich, CT  
Course taught: *Race and Ethnic Relations*

2012-2013

*Capital Community College*, Hartford, CT

2006-2013

Courses taught: *Foundations of Sociology, Introduction to Social Welfare, Community Organization, and Minorities in the US*

- Taught 15-week courses to diverse adult populations.
- Developed syllabus and overall course structure and content, including service learning component for classes with this requirement.
- Developed study guides, quarterly quizzes, final examinations, class exercises, and written assignments.
- Integrated Blackboard learning technology, guest lecturers and audio/video/technology resources in class to enhance student learning.
- Performed student needs assessments and pre- and post- testing for teaching effectiveness/evaluation.
- Oversight of student-led initiatives in civic participation and campus outreach.

University of Connecticut School of Social Work, West Hartford, CT

**Adjunct Instructor**

2007-2013

Courses taught: *Analysis of Social Welfare Policy & Delivery Systems, Human Behavior in the Social Environment: Macro Theories*

- Taught 14-week courses to diverse adult populations.
- Prepared curricula and develop study guides, midterm and final papers.
- Served on course advisory panel to evaluate and enhance course objectives and outcome measures in compliance with CSWE requirements.

**Field Education Instructor**

1999-present

- Provide clinical supervision and field instruction to MSW students attending UConn who were concurrently employed at state agencies including the Departments of Social Services and Labor.

- Provide counseling, support and resources.
- Provide oversight of field placement, assignments, and evaluations.

### **Trainer**

Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents, Rocky Hill, CT 2005

Course taught: *Promoting Children's Personal and Cultural Identity*

- Provided pre- and post-licensing certification training to foster and adoptive parents involved with the state's Department of Children and Families.
- Managed course structure.
- Maintained attendance and distributed certificates.

### **Mentor/Instructor**

Greater Hartford Alliance of Black Social Workers, Inc., Hartford, CT 1997-2005

Adopt-A-Class Program

- Developed curricula for weekly after-school mentoring program for elementary school students in the Hartford school system.
- Recruited students, provided instruction and oversight of planned activities.
- Maintained communication with teachers and parents.
- Provided support and brief counseling to students and their families.

## **RELATED EXPERIENCE**

State of CT Department of Social Services, Hartford, CT

### **Fair Hearings Officer**

2005-2015

- Conducted quasi-judicial hearings and rendered impartial decisions on departmental and other statewide programs, including managed care and nursing home discharge matters, in compliance with federal and state laws.
- Reviewed requests for fair hearings made in accordance with statutory provisions.
- Conducted hearings utilizing videoconferencing technology or in person.
- Examined and admitted to record all testimony, documents and other evidence.
- Questioned and interviewed witnesses and departmental staff to ensure due process between parties, including community agents, staff, private counsel, and attorneys general in all hearing matters.

### **Social Worker**

1997-2003

- At the Hartford Community Court, coordinated the Women's Holistic Health Program for women arrested for prostitution and other at-risk behaviors.
- Developed and implemented curriculum for court-mandated women's program, including oversight of group facilitation, program structure, attendance, and compliance.
- Prepared monthly statistical reports.
- Provided counseling, referrals, and crisis intervention; presented program information to various community groups, law enforcement agencies and national organizations.
- In the Adult Services division, provided counseling and case management services to disabled individuals and other adults at risk in the community.
- Performed needs assessments via home visits to determine services and other needs.

- Developed and implemented care plans to assist individuals in managing independently at home, including arranging for services with homecare and community agencies to provide services to clients such as nursing, Meals on Wheels, and personal care assistants.

St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center, Hartford, CT

**MSW Social Worker**

2003-2005

- Advocated for patients' best interests with regard to care, safety and treatment.
- Worked on interdisciplinary team with physicians, nurse case managers, nurses, and other providers to provide care coordination and discharge planning.
- Worked with community homecare agencies and medical equipment providers regarding patient care plans.
- Provided support, education, counseling and resources to patients and their families.
- Provided consultation to physicians and other medical staff on psychosocial and other issues.
- Facilitated bereavement support group.

City of Hartford Department of Human Services, Hartford, CT

**Social Worker I**

1989-1997

- Performed intake and assessment functions in the determination of financial, medical, and burial assistance.

## PRESENTATIONS

- *Achieving Success Through Higher Education*, presented to 60+ students and faculty at the Capital Community College Lunchtime Lecture Series, Hartford, CT 2009; 2010; 2012
- *Service Learning, CBPR and Social Justice*, moderated and presented to 50+ participants at the *Crossroads II Conference* sponsored by the Institute for Community Research, Hartford, CT, 2007.
- *Engaging City Residents in Community Based Research: A Companion of 3 Models*, presented at the *Crossroads Conference* sponsored by the Institute for Community Research, Hartford, CT, 2004.
- *Collaborating to Improve Systems for Youth and Families*, presented at the Child Welfare League of America's *Building Communities for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* Child Welfare Conference, Albany, New York, 2003.
- *Prostitution Protocol*, regularly presented to 30+ students at the *Philosophy of Porn & Prostitution* class, Dr. Jessica Spector, Trinity College, Hartford, CT, 2001-2003.
- *Risk Reduction: Women's Holistic Health Curriculum*, presented at the Greater Hartford AIDS Conference, Hartford, CT, 2002
- *Social Work and Healthcare*, regular presenter at Capital Community College, Hartford, CT, 2003-present.

## SCHOLARSHIPS & AWARDS

- Konover Fellow, University of Connecticut School of Social Work, 2007- present
- T. Roderick Silcott Scholarship, University of Connecticut School of Social Work, 2010-2012

- Elizabeth Sterling Scholarship, University of Connecticut School of Social Work, 2009-2010; 2014
- Elizabeth Sterling Travel Scholarship, University of Connecticut School of Social Work, 2008-2009
- Selena Brown Book Scholarship, National Association of Black Social Workers, Washington, DC, 2008
- Board of Directors Service Award, Community Health Services, Inc. Hartford, CT, 2005
- “Unsung Hero” Award, Upper Albany Neighborhood Revitalization Zone Organization, Hartford, CT, 2002
- Citation for community service to the Upper Albany Neighborhood, Connecticut General Assembly, 2002

### PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

- Council on Social Work Education 2007-present
- National Association of Black Social Workers, Inc. 1993-present  
Greater Hartford Chapter
  - Secretary, 1998-2003
  - Scholarship Chair, 1994-2007
- National Association of Hearing Officials 2006-present
- National Association of Social Workers 2007-present
- Society for Social Work and Research 2007-2011

### VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

- Social Work advisory board, *Our Lady of The Elms College* 2014-present  
Chicopee, MA
- Advisory board, *Connecticut Innocence Fund* 2012-present  
*Connecticut Bar Foundation*, Hartford, CT
- Social Work community advisory board 2009-present  
*University of St. Joseph, West Hartford, CT*
- Board of Directors, *Community Health Services, Inc.* 1999-2004  
Hartford, CT
- Honorary board member 2004-present
- Board of Directors, *Mercy Housing and Shelter Corporation*  
Hartford, CT 2003-2005

### TECHNICAL SKILLS

- Proficient in Blackboard Learn, 2U Online Teaching Platform, Moodle, Microsoft Office, Adobe software, PolyCom videoconferencing software
- Experience with statistical analysis software programs SPSS, Atlas.ti, QSR NVivo

**Karen R. Brown**

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