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The Dilemmas of Frontline Staff Working with the Homeless: Housing First, Discretion, and the Task Environment

Carissa van den Berk-Clark^{1,2}

¹Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis Missouri, USA

²Department of Veteran Affairs, VA St. Louis Healthcare System, St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Abstract

This paper examines staff discretion in permanent supportive housing facilities run by a nonprofit agency claiming to use a housing-first approach. Field observation, archival data, and individual and group interviews with staff and clients were examined to better understand agency processes involved in intake, sanctions, and disposal of clients to evaluate housing-first fidelity. In their day-to-day interactions with clients, frontline workers' discretion is affected by working conditions such as lack of resources and heavy workloads, as well as by demands placed on the agency by members of the its task environment. Implications for housing-first programs and homeless clients are discussed.

Keywords

homeless; discretion; task environment; political-economy; permanent supportive housing

It has been established that public policy is translated into practical action through street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) (Brodkin, 1997; Lipsky, 1980). SLBs are individuals who serve as gatekeepers to human service organizations and who facilitate access to health and social services. Ambiguities and inconsistencies inherent to legislated social welfare policy produce an environment where SLB discretion flourishes, but such discretion is often dictated by working conditions, management prerogatives, and disparities in resources (Brodkin, 1997). As American social assistance has become increasingly privatized, particularly in the areas of housing and welfare assistance, this street-level discretion has become even further removed from public oversight and control (Brodkin, 2012). Such policy changes have inspired new approaches to implementation research, providing significant information about organizational context and how policy politics affect the way agencies implement services. However, these studies have not emphasized how SLB discretion is used in housing programs serving low-income or homeless populations, nor have they examined how SLB discretion affects the fidelity of evidence informed practices. This paper examines the effect of inter-organizational interactions on the implementation of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Shelter Plus Care (SPC)

Corresponding author: Carissa van den Berk-Clark, PhD, MSW, Washington University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry, Medical Box 8134, St. Louis MO 63110, Phone: 314-286-2282; Fax: 314-286-2285.

Notes on Contributors: BLINDED

program, as well as the fidelity of programs using a housing first approach, through a case study of frontline workers at an agency providing project-based permanent supportive housing (PSH).

The “Housing-first” Approach to Permanent Supportive Housing

Individuals with mental and co-occurring substance use disorders substantially over-represent the populations that are considered “chronically homeless” (Ohara, 2007). The “chronically homeless” have been continuously homeless for a year or more or have 4 or more episodes of homelessness in the past 3 years (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2005) because they face many barriers to accessing and retaining affordable housing, and they are often most resistant to traditional modes of services (Ohara, 2007). The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) favors a “housing-first” approach for this population because it seeks to break down these barriers by offering an alternative to traditional continuum-of-care practices and by providing permanent housing to homeless individuals directly from the streets (Center for Supportive Housing, 2010). Housing-first programs emphasizes consumer choice and self-determination through the use of recovery-oriented, team-based services, as well as active use of harm reduction and assertive engagement (Gilmer, Stefancic, Sklar, & Tsemberis, 2013). A key element to housing first programs is that they do not require participants to demonstrate sobriety, psychiatric symptom stability or for participants to complete substance abuse treatment. Additional key elements include separate case management (CM) and property management (PM) departments, a low demand model of service delivery (low requirements for client participation in services), and eviction prevention interventions (Watson, Orwat, Wagner, Shuman, & Tolliver, 2013).

HUD has several funding mechanisms to establish supportive housing programs with a housing first approach: The Shelter Plus Care Program (SPC), the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) program and the Supportive Housing Program (SHP). These programs were enacted and funded through public laws 100-77 (1987), 102-550 (1992), and 111-22 (2009), and they aim to decrease homelessness and increase self-sufficiency among low-income individuals who have mental health and substance abuse problems (HUD, 2010). To attain these goals, HUD provides funding through the SPC, SRO and SHP programs to for-profit and non-profit organizations to establish quasi-institutional housing in the community, with flexible support services (often referred to as permanent supportive housing (PSH)). The SPC program is of particular importance in reducing barriers among the chronically homeless because it provides incentives and funding for supportive services.

Housing-first approaches are favored because they improve housing retention rates among chronically homeless individuals. For example, traditional continuum-of-care PSH interventions have retention rates between 22-56% (Kresky-Wolf, Lorson, O'Brien, & McGraw, 2010) while housing first programs have retention rates between 56% to 91% (Kertesz, Crouch, Milby, Cusimano, & Schumacher, 2009). However, the approach is controversial not just among providers but also staff and funders because of ideological views about substance use and concerns about safety (Cohen, 2008; George, Chernega, Stawiski, Figert, & Vendixen, 2008; BLINDED AUTHOR) and program fidelity has been

cited as an important predictor of retention in such programs (Watson, et al., 2013; Gilmer et al., 2013).

According to a study by Watson et al. (2013), out of 29 available measures of program fidelity, the mean fidelity score was 76.27 (SD=12.94) for a sample of 51 PSH providers and 84.76 (SD=9.89) for the 21 PSH providers claiming to have a housing first approach. These measures included the structure and composition of human resources (e.g. diversity of staff, staff education requirements, use of harm reduction, staff availability, clinical staff availability), program boundaries (e.g. serve chronically homeless, have an outreach department, separation of case management (CM) from property management (PM) departments, eviction only for violent clients or excessive non-payment of rent, consistent enforcement of policy), flexibility of housing policy (e.g. flexible admission policy, income policy, payment policy and drug/alcohol policy, as well as housing relocation, consumer choice/location, eviction protection, consumer input and unit holding), nature of social services (e.g. low demand approach, harm reduction approach, more CM involvement for first 6 months, CM caseloads of 10 or less, ongoing consumer education about housing first policies) and approaches to service delivery and the nature of housing and housing services (e.g. structure of housing (scattered site or not), fast placement, temporary housing available, consumer is leaseholder). Although Watson et al., (2013) did not examine which fidelity elements were more likely to be implemented; such findings show that housing first providers have only a slightly higher fidelity rating than the full sample.

Other studies of housing-first programs show a higher preference for individuals with severe psychiatric diagnosis and less severe substance use issues (Kertesz et al., 2009). Issues related to fidelity and client outreach thus may be related to how PSH organizations process clients, i.e. evaluate client eligibility, sanction non-compliant clients, and dispose of clients (Hasenfeld, 1972), and how such processes are often administered by frontline “street-level bureaucrats” (SLBs). In his 1980 book, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, Lipsky argued that discretionary behaviors — favoritism toward one client over another (or distribution of resources) — was a strategy used by SLBs, like those working with the homeless, to cope with certain working conditions relevant to all bureaucratic environments involving the general public. According to Lipsky, all SLBs deal with working conditions dominated by the following factors: inadequate resources, high demand, ambiguous goal expectations, and client leverage (pp. 27-28). In order to cope with such conditions, agency workers form “patterns of practice, routines, and simplifications.”

Since Lipsky, studies of worker discretion show that resource limitations or reimbursement incentives tend to over-influence the development of informal practice (Brodkin, 2012; Ellis, 1998). As a result, SLBs have less power to shape policies to fit their perspectives or the perspectives of program innovators because of resource constraints, as well as other constraints posed by different regulators and funders. For this reason, PSH interventions may be limited in their ability to improve homelessness, even when they attempt to utilize a “housing-first” approach. A study of how homeless were recruited into PSH facilities by Dickson-Gomez, Convey, Hilario, Corbett, & Weeks (2007) illustrates this point. They argue that case managers and other SLBs working in drop-in centers and other types of homeless programs prioritized clients seeking permanent housing, to ensure what the staff

viewed as the best use of limited resources. They also ensured that few drug-abusing clients applied for housing by increasing bureaucratic red tape and acting disrespectfully towards them. Although the availability of housing-first programs may have changed this dynamic to some extent since 2007, the tendency of these SLBs to sometimes withhold resources from the homeless, based on what staff at these sites might think about certain applicants and on what resources are available, speaks volumes about how tenant screening affects outcomes. It is clear that further study of the use of discretion within homeless agencies is needed to better understand whether such factors decrease the fidelity of the housing-first approach.

The Task Environment of Permanent Supportive Housing and the Housing-first Mission

According to political economic theory, social service agencies like those serving the homeless are often embedded in multi-actor organizational networks, also known as task environments (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). For a typical PSH agency, for example, the task environment may include the following stakeholders: local, state, and federal government; other social service agencies serving the homeless; advocacy groups; for-profit business interests; and the courts (Center for Supportive Housing, 2010). Each organization or group has its own agenda and goals to implement, which may conflict with or be congruent with federal policy related to homelessness (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Members in the task environment, therefore, continuously engage in processes of exchange to ensure their individual goals are met, creating interdependence and power differentials among members. Members whose value of contribution is higher enjoy higher levels of control, and, thus, are more likely to see their demands met by members with lesser value.

Much of the resources available to build and administer PSH is acquired through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which funds three programs offering PSH: Shelter Plus Care (SPC), Single Room Occupancy (SRO), and the Supportive Housing Program (SHP). Because PSH agencies rely so heavily on HUD funding, it is assumed that the way they process homeless applicants and clients will respond most closely to the Department's demands, such that complying with these demands takes precedence over those of other task environment actors, including demands for housing-first fidelity. However, HUD funding is devolved to state and local governments or local housing authorities (LHAs) through contracts that only pay 30-50% of PSH agencies' operating costs and nothing toward initial capital improvement. This requires that the agencies balance HUD constraints with constraints of other members of the task environment (Rosenthal & Foscarinis, 2006; Center for Supportive Housing, 2010).

Precisely how leaders of PSH agencies motivate lower-level SLB staff to adjust to and balance constraints of the task environment through their discretionary decisions is unclear. Worker-client relationships in PSH are unique because they can take place over many years, meaning that some client relationships could take precedence over administrative directives (See (Lipsky, 1980)). It also could mean that staff members are compelled to engage in discretionary behavior beyond simple distribution of resources. That is, these staff may engage in agency social construction strategies that are much more coercive, such as those mentioned by Lipsky (1980), in order to cope with working conditions resulting from PSH's

unique institutional setting and task environment constraints. These strategies include the utilization of pressure specialists, individuals higher up in the organizational hierarchy who can exert pressure on clients, and the establishment of emergency categories to deal with crisis situations, e.g. when other tools fail to control client demand. Because such methods involve high levels of coercion, it is hypothesized that they reduce the agency's ability to maintain housing-first fidelity. The aim of this study, therefore, is to examine (1) task environment constraints faced by a large PSH, (2) whether those constraints are passed down to lower-level workers, (3) how these workers respond through their discretionary behaviors, and (4) how these behaviors affect the agency's ability to retain a housing-first approach.

Methods

This study uses an ethnographic case-study design to explore discretionary processes in an organizational setting (See Watkins-Hayes, 2009). That setting is the “Cochran Housing Corporation” (fictitious name, herein referred to as “Cochran”),¹ an agency that considers itself to be housing-first, and is located in a Skid Row neighborhood in the United States. Stratification, high crime and poverty, and numerous homeless services such as temporary and permanent housing programs, emergency shelters, and drop-in centers characterize the neighborhood. The area's population is mostly black, male, and homeless, often living in single room occupancy (SRO) hotels or on the streets.

The agency's intake office (tenant services office), as well as 14 of the agency's 22 housing facilities (or sites), offering HUD's SPC-financed units were examined (the remaining 6 buildings did not offer SPC-financed units so they were not included in this study). SPC-financed units were of particular interest because the program established lower barriers to entry for the chronically homeless and also required the agency to provide the homeless individual with supportive services. Supportive services included case management, medical, psychological and psychiatric as well as other types of services. Each facility had between 40 and 150 units and had one live-in property manager (PM) and 1-3 desk clerks, who oversaw maintenance, safety and rent collection. Three of the facilities also had onsite, supportive services, including medical, psychological, psychiatric, legal, substance abuse, and/or nursing services. PMs, desk clerks, and intake workers were typically recruited from the local area and had a past history of homelessness and/or substance use. PMs' main responsibilities included rent collection, maintenance and security.

Because housing facilities were funded through SPC grants, case managers (CMs) and other clinical professionals were also hired to work with clients. CMs and other clinical professionals were typically White, middle-class, college-educated females with a Master's degree, holding caseloads of 20 to 40 clients. CMs were required to meet one-on-one with clients every week for the first 6 months and once a month thereafter to supervise housing retention and self-sufficiency goals related to income, mental health and substance use (Center of Supportive Housing, 2010b). CMs sometimes worked onsite, sometimes

¹To ensure confidentiality of subjects and the Permanent Supportive Housing agencies under study, pseudonyms were used in the place of subject, agency, and agency location names.

remotely, while PMs worked and lived onsite. Both CMs and PMs were required to participate in meetings to discuss residents once a week.

Residents, or clients, were previously homeless individuals from the local area, most of whom (approximately 85%) had been chronically homeless because of eligibility requirements of the SPC program. Additional eligibility requirements included income thresholds (under the poverty level), and having either a physical or mental disability (included HIV and substance dependence) (HUD, 2010). The Cochran agency was chosen, because it was a part of the Skid Row neighborhood for over 20 years, administered a large number of buildings (which improved author's ability to control for different staff environments) and had called itself a "housing-first" agency since the early 1990s.

Data, which were collected from January 2009 through April 2012, included observation, individual and group interviews, survey data and archival data. The majority of data collection (about 90%) was administered by the author. The length of time in which data was collected facilitated higher levels of trust among respondents which improved reliability of answers about discretionary behaviors (See Padgett, 1998). Data were collected in five stages for the purpose of evaluating agency processes: (1) observation and informal open-ended interviews of facility workers and clients (January 2009-November 2009) (for the purpose of establishing a basic understanding of agency processes, goals and staff roles); (2) long structured (formal) individual and group interviews (approximately 2 hours each), more observation, and open-ended interviews of staff and clients (November 2009-June 2011) to get a deeper understanding of these mechanisms and to examine how these mechanisms connect to street level discretion and political economy theories; ; (3) observation and open-ended interviews of intake workers (March 2011-June 2011) to better understand the application process and access to housing; and (5) archival data collection, including agency documents, client files, press releases, and media related to the agency and its surrounding neighborhood (November 2009-April 2012) to better define and understand the task environment.

Observation of respondents and agency events took place in a variety of venues, including day-to-day operations, staff meetings, client programs, events, community meetings, and in communal areas occupied by clients. Each site (or building) was observed to the point of saturation (i.e. a search for patterns among initial sample of cases, then a search for more cases and observations not fitting initial patterns). There were also a total of 134 open-ended interviews with clients and staff and 16 taped structured interviews with staff. Respondents were recruited for interviews using, at initial stages, snowball sampling methods and later deviant case sampling. Criteria for interviews included being either a staff member or client of Cochran (current or former), or applying for housing from Cochran. A total of 4 focus groups included 2 client focus groups (each with 7-8 participants), 1 CM focus group (n=11) and 1 PM focus group (n=8). A total of 106 respondents participated in interviews throughout the study (n=22 PM, n=21 CM, n=53 clients/applicants, n=10 other staff persons). The large number of interviews improved my ability to generalize to the resident population, to more effectively use triangulation methods and to assess organizational dynamics over time. Demographic characteristics and roles of interview participants are

listed in Table 1. Data collection procedures, which included informed consent, were approved by University of California's IRB (Number 11-001177).

All field notes, interview transcripts and archival data were coded at the organizational level, using Atlas.ti v. 7 software, drawing heavily from grounded theory. Two coders were utilized at the first stage of data collection to establish an initial set of codes, and one coder was used thereafter. Debriefing sessions between the coders and the principal investigator (of a separate program evaluation) continued throughout data collection. After initially being open-coded, all data were analyzed for themes by carefully reading and considering text inductively as the analysis proceeded. A pattern of discretionary behavior on the part of PMs was clear at the initial stages of data collection, and this pattern was discussed in subsequent debriefing sessions. More focused coding continued to reveal these discretionary patterns, as well as the factors associated with them. Initial memos were written at this point, noting perceived connections and showing similarities to previous findings and theory on SLBs, most notably by Lipsky (1980) and Brodtkin (1997), which led to re-reading data and refining existing coding schemes (See Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Most notably, we utilized social constructionist epistemologies present in the street level approach to better understand how frontline workers categorized clients as either “good” or “bad.” These categorizations illuminated how discretionary decisions were made. In re-reading data, I determined whether PMs actually had discretion and where that discretion existed, by examining PM routines during intake and disposal processes (including admission screening, sanctions and eviction). The routines, as well as organizational structure, were then described to explain PMs' discretionary power and motivation.

Results

Cochran's Task Environment and the Roles of Frontline Staff

Cochran was one of the prominent providers of PSH in the skid row area and gained prominence in the 1980s through its work to save local area single room occupancy (SRO) buildings from demolition and to facilitate housing for the homeless. Cochran was also known for its flexible admission policy, drug policy and alcohol use policies since the 1990s. That is, unlike most of the agencies established during that time period, Cochran did not require residents to abstain from substance use or to graduate from substance abuse treatment to be admitted to housing nor did they require that residents abstain from substance use once admitted. In other words, Cochran was run much like a typical low-rent SRO apartment building which depended heavily on rents of residents who received welfare and social security payments.

As local funding became to shrink (i.e. welfare programs and city funding for housing for the homeless were cut), the federal government put increasing resources into PSH programs through SPC/SRO/SHP programs. So, because decreased welfare funding made it more difficult for clients to pay rent, Cochran now would have to compete to receive funding to maintain its portfolios of properties through the local housing authority (LHA), the board of which was largely comprised of real estate professionals, developers, lawyers, and tenants of HUD housing. Obtaining HUD subsidies was one way that Cochran could continue to renovate SROs and maintain them, but HUD provided no capital funding, had very strict

As this passage clarifies, in order to gain access to land, abandoned buildings, and funding through task environment members, Cochran must emphasize three types of goals in its service delivery system: income goals, maintenance goals, and safety goals. Property Managers (PMs) play a central role in responding to these demands of task environment members and implementing the resulting organizational goals. A director at Cochran said this about the PM's role and some aspects of their workload:

Property management role is what property management role is; it is focused on the buildings [...]. Buildings have multiple levels of funding. Almost all of those layers of funding have got strings attached to it. They come with regulatory covenants that we agreed to file for 50 long, bitter years. Property management is charged with documenting, recording, getting all that information and filing it in a nice, articulate fashion, so that when we are audited, which we are, they can just lay it out and say, this is what we are doing. Our buildings on the property management side have a heavy reporting burden connected to them. So there's that, then there's the curb appeal of the building.

In order to document and record information which funders want to hear (as well as guarantee “curb appeal”), Cochran needed to hire individuals capable of communicating rules and requirements to tenants. In order to do this, Cochran typically hires former homeless individuals to work onsite as PMs. They are often favored tenants who are capable of understanding the demands posed by the task environment (HUD, banks, etc.), and are already situated in a place of authority among other tenants. Cochran's website and billboards features these former tenant-PMs, who often tell stories of how Cochran helped them achieve self-sufficiency by believing in their abilities. These PMs also save Cochran money because they are willing to live onsite, take a low wage, and therefore provide low-cost, 24-7 staff coverage.

PMs have a significant workload which includes collecting clients' rents, screening potential clients, sanctioning clients who are not following the rules of the building, supervising maintenance of the building, facilitating eviction and documentation required by HUD, banks and other funders. Although technically unsupervised, PMs are under constant video surveillance² and are required to write hourly reports in logbooks and incident reports, describing any problem occurring in the hotel. A PM talks about how video cameras and log files effect how he does his job:

They don't like you because you're always looking at the camera. You're always sitting by the camera. They're talking when you go home they are going to do something to do you. And I said oh yeah, I wasn't worried about it. I walk all the time...But in a way, I can't lie I did get a little worried. So I would say, instead of going the same way I always go home, I'll go down this street today and maybe for a week I'll just go down this street. I guess it did worry me a little bit.

These comments show that the video cameras strongly effected both how PM did their job but also how they related to clients. These strategies have the potential to affect PMs' behavior because they have to ensure that their observations of events and their consequent reactions translate from video recording to incident report. Likewise, PMs' behavior has the potential to be further affected by measures of their performance corresponding to task environment pressures, including rent accruals, HUD re-certifications (annual checks for income eligibility), vacancy reports, and HUD or local government inspection “write-up” reports on building maintenance.

²Videos are not pointed directly on property managers as they sit at the front desk but positioned throughout the building.

People who live in the streets had different rules. They know nothing about LA housing department, building safety, fire department; they don't know anything about that. So when they move, they have to abide by those city codes. The housing authority have their occupancy agreement and we have our occupancy agreement and house rules, but then when you get to the LA fire department, they got codes, building and safety, they got codes. These may not be in house rules. So when they come and say that this code has to be enforced, we have to abide by that.

As explained by the PM above, a major challenge for PMs is getting clients to cooperate with these requirements.

Another effective means of control Cochran possessed over PMs is through roaming supervisors. Although onsite only two or three times a week for a few hours each, these supervisors exert influence through a mentorship/apprenticeship-type relationship, taking place, sometimes, over many years. PM supervisors have more organizational political might than any other worker at Cochran. They report to a director of property management, who reports directly to the executive director. Finally, PM have much to lose if they do not follow agency expectations – doing so not only threatens their job (which essentially pays a little more than minimum wage) but also has the potential to make them homeless because most live on-site.

In their role as landlord and to some extent security officer (because no other security officers were not hired by Cochran), PM cannot universally engage homeless clients and encourage trusting relationships. To deal with some of the challenges inherent in this situation, Case Managers (CMs) are hired to work side-by-side with PMs. These CMs have at least a bachelor's degree in social work, counseling or similar degrees, along with training in practices such as motivational interviewing and assertive community treatment to improve housing-first fidelity. Although CMs have much less power at Cochran than PMs, they still represent an additional demand posed by the task environment. These CMs are required to ensure housing stability, so as to appeal to stakeholders interested not just in the human rights issues inherent to chronic homelessness and housing-first approaches, but also in the costs associated with local services (HUD, who requires such staff persons be hired, as well as local and state government, through departments of mental health). Thus, CMs act as client advocates who help ensure clients achieve a certain level of housing stability (housing stability is measured by the amount of months that clients reside at Cochran), despite the clients' erratic and sometimes destructive behavior. This aspect of the CMs' role irritates PMs, who see CMs as interfering with larger demands and organizational goals related to other task environment actors, like HUD and LHAs, which are more interested in building maintenance and community-level stability. One PM said this about the challenges CMs pose for them:

If I allow this tenant to do something, I have to let everyone in here do it. As an advocate, the best thing for you to do is, when we communicate, we communicate as a team, and this is what you are doing, and this is where the rules say you can't. As a CM, you have to ask tenant, how we can help you not do this, but some CM take their side and say they should not have to follow the rules.

Routines and Discretion at Cochran

To comply with agency expectations, PMs must constrain client demand, balance conflicting agency expectations, and decrease workloads. This is accomplished through the use of routines, specifically those that ensure staff attention to task environment priorities. The most prominent routines (i.e. the routines that took the majority of the PMs' and other frontline workers' time) included the applicant screening routine, hotlist and sanction routines, and the eviction routine. These routines existed to ensure that the right applicants were chosen for the limited slots available, that buildings were well maintained despite the lack of suitable maintenance staff, that safety was guaranteed despite the absence of security staff and adequate police protection, and that rents were collected each month despite client mental health and economic circumstances. Routines were bureaucratized and formalized throughout the agency. To ensure consistency, PMs and CMs reviewed routines with supervisors during weekly meetings, where supervisors would provide recommendations informed by these organization-wide routines.

The application routine: Finding a “good” tenant—The application routine involves recruiting clients to the waiting list, to begin agency- and HUD-level application processes with the main objective being to find a “good tenant.” A good tenant meets eligibility requirements set by HUD, by the State Department of Mental Health, and by other funders interested in improving housing access among the chronically homeless and severely mentally ill. A good tenant also is not so disabled that (s)he is unable to live independently.

In order to acquire these desired types of tenants, Cochran structured its application processes in three ways: (1) it collaborates with agencies that serve the mentally ill to recruit clients who already have a mental health diagnosis; (2) it engages in a very open application process at the initial stages of the application routine, then progresses to more restrictive processes to filter out applicants; and (3) it teaches applicants how to be good tenants by imposing orientation programs and hurdles throughout the application process. Cochran divided the completion of these tasks across two entities: the intake department and PM department. The intake department educates applicants on the benefits and expectations of PSH, compiles the waiting list, and assists applicants at initial stages of the application process. Afterwards, the PM department, which filters out those applicants deemed likely to become “bad tenants” (e.g. unable to live independently, follow agency rules, or pay rent), continues the process of teaching applicants how to become good tenants.

The initial stage of the application process could last as long as 8 months. Applicants complete orientations programs either after receiving referrals from partnering agencies³ serving the homeless mentally ill or during the times when waiting lists are open, and they are prescreened before being placed on the waiting list. Prescreening generally is just an information-gathering phase, as no applicants are denied housing at this point. However, applicants are required to sign in weekly to keep their place on the waiting list or risk being

³HUD favors Public Housing Authorities which contract with agencies who actively collaborate with other service providers in the community. Public housing authorities also sent out notices to agencies serving the homeless mentally ill when building construction was finalized and a large number of units would become available. There are also further funding incentives provided through the state department of mental health and local foundations that encourage this kind of collaboration, especially when it comes to outreach to homeless with serious mental health disorders (Center of Supportive Housing, 2010)

removed from the list entirely. Separate waiting lists were available for applicants who were referred by partnering agencies, which were much shorter. Some tenants explained the burden of this part of the application screening routine:

I signed in every week and then that week, when they are just about to place you, they are like, “oh, this is missing out of your file,” “oh, you have to do this again.” So, then they have you run around like you are a chicken with your head cut off. Then they see you don't have something else, and start the process all over again. I mean, come on! “Oh you brought that, now go get this.”

As illustrated above, tenants commonly see the application routine as simply jumping through hoops. However, it is important to recognize how these processes establish the relationship between clients and Cochran from the beginning, by decreasing client demand and teaching the client his or her role in the organization. These processes also communicate to the applicant that there is substantial competition for the finite resources available.

The more stringent stage of the application process begins when an applicant's name reaches the top of the waiting list, and a PM has a vacancy in his or her building. At this point, the applicant endures extensive paperwork with HUD, verifying financial eligibility, homeless eligibility, and mental health eligibility. Additional grounds for ineligibility are evidence of criminal offenses, or HUD evictions occurring within the past 5 years (applicants graduating from substance abuse treatment receive an exception to these requirements if they apply for a SPC unit). Applicants who meet these requirements then have their file sent to a PM to perform additional income checks and to contact previous landlords and any referring social service agencies. During this time, applicants are prepped for a high-stakes, in-person interview with the PM. Applicants failing that interview go back onto the waiting list until the next vacancy. One client explained her interview with the PM:

I had a 2-hour interview. They sit and asked me about every part of my life, every part and I cried, I laughed. They really put me through it and at the end, [the PM] said to me, “Now you finished feeling sorry for yourself? Now you ready to get down to business?”

As this statement implies, the interview with the PM lays the groundwork for all subsequent routines, clarifying the PM's role in teaching the soon-to-be client how to be a good tenant. Although framed as a therapeutic interaction, the application routine really provides the PM with an opportunity to show clients how program compliance is connected to sanctions and disposal processes.

Hotlist and sanction routines: Good tenants equal good buildings—Cochran essentially utilizes what has been referred to as a “low demand” model when it comes to engaging clients with frontline staff. Because clients are essentially expected to be able to live independently, staff only engage them after just moving in, or when client behavior proves risky not only to the client, but also to other clients or to the building as a whole.

To decrease the risks involved with such a model, PMs compile a weekly “hotlist”, a list of all clients whom they want to keep an eye on and present this list to CMs and agency supervisors at weekly meetings. Because PM reside onsite, supervisors see them as a vital

intermediary between management and residents because they can see, first-hand when clients deteriorate. This hotlist includes clients who are late on rent or at risk for not paying rent the next month, who might cause staff additional work, who frequently complain, who do not “fit well into the building,” or who might otherwise cause trouble in the building. The hotlist also includes all those clients who receive “write-ups.” Clients receive write-ups when they violate building rules. The write up is then sent to the client's CM who is required to engage the client and use the event as an opportunity to teach the client further how to be a “good tenant.”

HUD, police, and local government (mostly city) inspectors routinely inspect PSH units, penalizing agencies unable to meet their maintenance and safety standards. Meanwhile, HUD subsidies alone do not permit adequate response to these demands, compelling Cochran and PMs to shift some of the maintenance and safety burden onto tenants via monthly room inspections and through guest policies. Maintenance demands are shifted to clients by requiring clients to prepare for monthly room inspections by emptying out cabinets beforehand, so that PMs can spray for bugs, while also mimicking a HUD or city inspector in the process. In addition, PMs also use the opportunity to investigate rooms for any looming maintenance problem, such that Cochran may gain additional surveillance and information on its clients.

PM also can gather evidence about clients through an elaborate guest policy that dictates the time guests may arrive, if an overnight guest fee needs to be paid, when the guests are required to leave, and whether guests may be left unattended. According to one property manager:

Violation of guest privileges can usually tell you about other issues. They might have relapsed into substance abuse; maybe they shut themselves off from us, but keep sneaking in their significant other, which is a totally codependent. It usually is leading up to something or is because of something.

As the statement above implies, the information that PMs gather is then distributed throughout the agency through meetings, logbook notes and through incident reports. Guest policies also control crime in and around the building by monitoring and controlling who comes in and who leaves. As another PM explains, “if there was no policy for IDs, this hotel would be running off the hook. There are dealers out there. I've got people that sell drugs all the way around the corner.”

Tenants who violate either of these policies receive a “write-up.” To PMs, the hotlist emergency categories were a necessary tool, not just for information gathering, but also to deal with working conditions and agency expectations related to crime and maintenance, because such tools provide them a significant degree of control over clients. Bad tenants ignore these write-ups and let warnings accumulate. When warnings accumulate, PM staff assigns emergency categories to the client and brings in PM supervisors as pressure specialists. At this point, the client is expected to attend a closed-door, hot-seat meeting with the PM and PM supervisor, where the client is counseled to sign a contract agreeing to stop any disruptive behavior.

The eviction routine: Disposing of bad apples—Because worker-client relations occur in a closed environment in PSHs, clients are very aware of the consequences of violating house rules or rent policy. If, for example, a client routinely violates a guest policy but still retains housing, a message is sent to other tenants that they do not need to follow guest policy either. A CM at one of the buildings said this:

We don't try [to let write ups pile up] — we have to — because we have to build a strong enough case. If you got to court, they don't recognize it as much. Because when we go to court, we go to court, landlord v. tenant, not housing authority v. resident. If you have the fact that they hadn't paid their rent, you're good, if not, you're not.

As the statement above implies, attempting to evict the client in response to most rule violations (like guest policy) is untenable. This is because landlord/tenant courts will recognize guest policies as violations of FAIR housing law (Title VIII Civil Rights Act of 1968), and the PMs' ability to use their discretion to improve the agency's ability to respond to the task environment demands will then be weakened. However, clients who do not pay rent do not enjoy this protection, as courts recognize the obligation to pay rent in landlord/tenant contracts. Thus the court, by reinforcing the agency's attempts to dispose of disruptive clients through legal evictions, is a very important member of Cochran's task environment. This helps Cochran retain better control over clients and better respond to other task environment demands.

The eviction routine starts with a 3-day notice that is posted on the client's door. This notice essentially creates a community intervention, as other tenants may see that this person is considered a bad tenant at risk of eviction. According to one PM:

We create the crisis. We try to keep it — if it's just nonpayment of rent we try to keep it to property management, but if we have some insight that maybe there is substance abuse, then we try to create a contract.

Good tenants respond very quickly to these cues and often either engage with CM or work out a payment plan with the PM. Good tenants accept and comply with all parts of the agreement. Bad tenants do not adequately respond to these routines and, as one PM put it, “require me to stop what I'm doing to deal with them.” To deal with these bad tenants, PMs attempt to use tools such as emergency categories and pressure specialists (PM supervisors) to force them to reconsider their behavior.

The process of dealing with bad tenants and putting out fires starts with the use of sanctions (or write-ups) or a 3-day notice. This means that CM has only 3 days to draft a plan for their clients to bring to the PM for consideration. If a plan that pleases the PM is not found, the client is required to attend another hot-seat meeting with the PM and PM supervisor, where (s)he is given two choices: allow the PM to go ahead and evict him/her through the court system, make quick changes to behavior (usually by entering substance abuse treatment) or sign a 30-day notice. A 30-day notice is a legal alternative established through HUD, which allows residents of HUD housing to avoid a 5-year eviction penalty⁴ in exchange for agreeing to leave within 30 days. The availability of such tools for disposal processes

heavily influences PM discretion, and it prompts CMs to put pressure on clients to make changes very quickly.

In addition, these tools add to the PMs' role legitimacy and increase their ability to meet demands of the task environment, such as HUD's vacancy and abandonment requirements. The vacancy requirement necessitates quick evictions, which is often hard to accomplish through the legal system. Because some clients can make changes very quickly to avoid eviction, these methods are regarded by staff as a cornerstone of Cochran's success. However, the true effect of the routines is unclear, and they may cause different reactions depending on the nature of client supports, mental health issues, etc. A supervising manager of social services at Cochran put it this way:

Mostly, people in our buildings get evicted because their drug use is out of control. They have no money, so they get evicted because they don't pay their rent, or their behavior is so disruptive to the community that they are breaking the rules all over the place, and we have to evict them, and they can't change their behavior. So, one of the challenges, and Debra and the rest of the case managers have an incredible challenge, because in the world of treatment in regular social service organizations, people who have behavioral problems but come to an office, you have all the time in the world to deal with them. In this situation, if you can't help them move along quickly enough, they are going to get evicted, and that's just the way it is.

Discussion

This study shows that task-environment demands of many permanent supportive housing providers, specifically those utilizing project-based facilities, can conflict with the fidelity of housing-first programs. HUD and other more dominant members of the political economy required that Cochran facilitate community and economic development in the area by renovating abandoned SROs and by reducing homelessness, improving residential dwellings and reducing criminal activity. The agency faced significant constraints, however, when it came to access to capital funding as well as funding for 24-hour clinical staff, maintenance and security.

To deal with these requirements and constraints, the agency passed them down to lower level staff (in this case PM) in the form of increased role responsibilities and workload. These lower level staff then passed these expectations down to clients and were able to persuade clients to comply with such expectations through their ability to distribute resources. In other words, clients who improved PMs' ability to fulfill agency expectations of maintenance, safety and rent collection were much more likely to attain and retain housing. For example, clients who consistently paid rent improved the agency's ability to maintain consistent rent accruals (banks and other investors) and were more likely to retain housing. Other favored clients who were more likely to attain and retain housing included those with less severe mental or substance use disorders (higher ability to "live independently") and those who followed guest and room condition policies.

⁴Residents evicted from HUD housing are banned for 5 years from reentering such housing. See (Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 2010)

Watson et al. (2013) lists 6 broad guidelines used by housing-first agencies, which include separate CM/PM departments, a low-threshold admission policy, a low-demand model, and eviction prevention interventions.² Although the agency understudy had attempted to follow all 6 of these broad guidelines, such attempts were weakened substantially because the guidelines often made it more difficult for the agency to fulfill requirements of the task environment. For example, the property management department may have been distinct from the case management department, but PMs had significantly more leverage when it came to client access to and retention of housing. The admission policy was also fairly open, but the openness made little difference in the face of significant resource constraints. There was simply not enough housing to keep up with demand. Furthermore, within this low-demand framework, clients dealt more with PMs and were expected to respond more to PM demands. Even though eviction prevention programs existed, such programs utilized many coercive tactics (pressure specialists) and required that homeless participants make changes very quickly, changes that were often unrealistic. All such factors point to the role of constraints by prominent members of PSHs' task environment, a task environment which demands PSHs reduce costs of homelessness while simultaneously improving community and economic development.

The majority of the 29 measures of housing-first fidelity from Watson et al., (2013) could also be observed at the agency. However, some vital measures, such as a flexible admission policy, consumer choice in housing location, and representative payees for all clients, were not present. Such measures directly conflicted with the agency's ability to respond to constraints in the task environment, and they were therefore either de-emphasized by the agency or not used at all, with discretion by staff taking its place. For example, as this study shows, assessment of "housing readiness" or ability to live independently is an important tool used by staff (e.g. staff had to choose applicants who were less severely disabled), because the agency did not have the resources or staff to treat the severely mentally ill. Meanwhile, the agency had trouble offering truly flexible admission policies because of HUD policies denying housing to individuals with criminal offenses in the past 5 years (See Curtis, Garlington & Schottenfeld, 2013), which provided exceptions to those who had finished a substance abuse treatment program in the past year and who were applying for SPC housing. In addition, even though housing fidelity measures recommend CM caseloads of 10 or less, CM had caseloads of 20-40 at Cochran. On the other hand, this did make the implementation of a low-demand model less challenging: CMs had much less time for each client.

Furthermore, the agency sustained itself via client fees as well as a variety of different funding streams. Such funding was unavailable to the agency if it had not simultaneously provided affordable housing. So using a scattered site model or providing other fidelity elements to the homeless like fast placement, temporary housing, consumer choice, housing relocation and unit holding were not viable. Last, the use of eviction, a vital mechanism used to control client behavior and demand, would be significantly weakened if clients were not expected to pay rent (because rent would be paid by a representative payee). This is because court systems would not recognize rule violations as a justification for eviction.

Scheid (2008) has pointed out that agencies working with the mentally ill commonly don't follow a rational model of organizational behavior. In order to meet what has been referred to as "multiple bottom lines", agencies loosely connect or couple inputs, processes, and outputs. Separating different organizational missions into different departments through the organizational structure is one way this is accomplished. By separating CM from PM within its organizational structure, the agency was able to follow two models: the community model with CMs (through its use of normative demands and focus on quality of services, quality of care, and access to care), and the commodity model with PMs (through its focus on technical demands for efficiency, cost containment, outcome assessment) (See also Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2012).

At the agency understudy, unfortunately, the commodity model was dominant because prioritizing occupancy, maintenance, and rent collection responds to much more pressing demands in its task environment which likely apply to other PSHs, as follows. One, it provides a concrete measure of housing success to local stakeholders. This is because processes of intake and disposal, as well as true improvement on the individual level, in terms of mental health and substance abuse outcomes, are invisible to such parties. A stable, well-maintained building, which to some extent stabilizes the surrounding communities, is a much more conspicuous indicator of success (see Rosenthal & Foscarinis, 2006; Lipsky, 1980). Two, PSH buildings are often heavily mortgaged because of substantial rehabilitation requirements from HUD and the local government, and rents are necessary to avoid default (see Bratt, Langley, Schwartz, & Vidal, 1994). Three, consistent rent accrual also allows PSH agencies to maintain their credit rating or property portfolio, facilitating their growth and access to additional funding (see Bratt, Langley, Schwartz, & Vidal, 1994). Finally, four, highlighting the acquisition of housing, rather than services to those with mental illness or substance abuse, allows PSH agencies, like the one understudy, to use legal mechanisms, such as eviction, to maintain control of clients and their guests, along with ensuring the agency retains clients who comply with HUD service and maintenance requirements (See Kertesz, et al., 2009).

Although the agency had been very successful in expanding the amount of affordable housing available to the homeless at the community level, its practices created a type of meritocracy, whereby applicants who were more resilient, had less severe mental health disorders, and who were more intelligent, jumped through the challenging hurdles successfully, while the rest struggled with homelessness. Housing-first programs have been established to prevent this from happening (Tsemberis et al., 2004). Better oversight of PMs and property management practices, as well as performance requirements connected to housing-first fidelity, are needed to improve access to and retention of housing among the homeless. Many of these practices are also the result of diminished resources, especially those resources targeted for initial capital improvements, maintenance, safety and administration, and they likely could be improved with higher subsidies. These findings, however, should be interpreted with caution. This study is limited in its ability to provide generalizable information about discretionary behavior in PSH agencies, since it represents only one case. Other limitations include increased bias resulting from one person collecting, coding and analyzing the majority of data. Nevertheless, this study is unique for its use of strong triangulation techniques and time in the field.

Another approach to housing the chronically homeless is to put less faith in the project-based approaches and more into scattered-site approaches. Several programs, like JOIN in Portland, Oregon and New York City's Pathways program, take a scattered-site approach, allowing them to emphasize social services rather than property management, thereby insuring increased housing-first fidelity. To ensure housing retention, counselors work in teams to anticipate problems with landlords and intervene before the landlord becomes involved (Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000). Landlords also are less likely to receive pressure from local or state government, because their buildings would not be targeted for serving homeless populations. However, it is unclear whether such programs improve the amount of affordable housing available to homeless populations, or if discretionary processes of private landlords also effect housing-first fidelity. Therefore, further studies utilizing comparative case analysis and surveys across different types of providers are necessary to confirm these findings.

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Table 1
Demographic characteristics by interview type

Characteristic	Total (n=184)	Informal Interview (n=134)	Structured Interview (n=16)	Group Interview (n=34)
Age				
35 and under	56	38	7	11
Over 35	128	96	9	23
Gender				
Male	77	55	8	14
Female	107	79	8	20
Race				
White	63	47	5	11
African American	92	64	10	18
Hispanic/Latino	26	22	1	3
Asian	1	0	0	1
American Indian	1	0	0	1
Other	1	1	0	0
Education				
High Diploma/less	3	0	3	0
Some College	29	23	5	1
Bachelors	38	28	3	7
Graduate School	37	27	5	5
Unknown	77	56	0	21
Agency Status				
Property Manager	40	23	9	8
Case Manager	58	41	6	11
Intake Worker	5	4	1	0
Management	10	10	0	0
Other Staff	3	3	0	0
Client	64	49	0	15
Applicant	4	4	0	0

Note: Age, gender, race and agency status characteristics were assessed through observation. Education was noted only when information was offered, except for structural interviews. There were 106 total respondents. Mean number of interviews per respondent is 1.91 (SD=1.5; Range 1-8).