To Be of Use:
Creative Practice across the Front Lines of Economic Self-Sufficiency Programs

by

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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Public Policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology February 2009

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ABSTRACT

How public serving agencies uphold the principles of responsiveness to multiple stakeholders and responsibility for program performance is a common theme in contemporary public management discourse. The contributions of frontline human service workers, however, have received relatively scant attention. Despite their prevalence among those charged with implementing social welfare policies and the acknowledged importance of their interactions with clients and other stakeholders, frontline staff continue to be perceived as part of the problem of government rather than potential contributors to the work of governance. This dissertation examines how workers with minimal authority or recognized professional expertise apply their knowledge from practice and commitment to service to enhance accountability, assume responsibility for improving program delivery, and develop their capacity to engage in both of these core tasks.

The study is based on five years of observations of three forums where frontline practitioners who operate the same two economic self-sufficiency programs in different nonprofit and public low-income housing agencies meet regularly to discuss common challenges, share solutions, and design new approaches to making the programs work better. These observations inform the concept of creative street-level practice I develop to describe departures from official program directives that add value to ongoing program delivery according to the community of practice.

I find that creative street-level practice is feasible in the context of both flexible and more rigid regulatory program designs. The self-sufficiency practitioners use strategies of collaboration and sensemaking to generate novel practices that range from subtle, procedural modifications to entirely new program elements. Creative street-level practice is a dynamic process that evolves incrementally over stages of program implementation and in response to developments in the organizational, economic, and policy environment. Participation in the discussion forums enhances the capacity for creative practice. The forums function as learning networks, work teams for collective action, and support groups for sustaining members’ commitment to keeping up the effort. Forum members generate and enact more creative practices when they perceive problems to be urgent and feasible for them to address and when external actors help facilitate discussion and convey their ideas to decision-makers.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A core lesson I learned in the course of pursuing this research project is that sustained efforts benefit from learning from and with others who share one’s interests, passion, and commitment. I have had the fortune to participate in several such communities of practice of people who are dedicated to thinking and acting creatively to address social problems. The evolution of the ideas that inform this dissertation and that facilitated its ultimate completion after long years in the making are testimony to the value of such collective deliberation and communal support.

First and foremost, I am grateful for the privilege of learning from the Family Self-Sufficiency and JOBLink practitioners whose creative efforts to make the programs work better are the heart of this project. In many respects, the sustained relationships with the communities the practitioner discussion forums embody transcend the numerous personal connections I developed over the years of research. Yet the contributions of several community members warrant special mention. Chief among my educators were Leslie Gleason, Jennifer Nyberg, Dawn Luberto, Tina Lack, Deidre Treffiti, Wendy Fedenkevez, Sherry Duchense, Luz Alvarado, Janine Eaton, Joanne Wilmot, Jane Danby, Ruth Bechtold, Rachelle Cyr, Kathleen Whitham, Ellen Campbell, Bill Minkle, Barbara Brant, Nancy Rivera, Suzanne Forgione, Ellen Weinhold, Susan Kanoff, and Fran Spayne.

Appreciation also goes to wise people in the broader community of practice of housing and service work whose acumen and dedication informed and inspired this work. I am particularly grateful to Barbara Sard, Jeff Lubell, Julia Kehoe, Kevin Donaher, Mary Ann Morrison, Maureen Fitzgerald, and the Rental Assistance directors of the Massachusetts Nonprofit Housing Association who afforded me the opportunity to engage with their staff in such a meaningful way.

All dissertation committees serve to initiate new members into the community of practice of their respective academic disciplines. I was especially fortunate to have Langley Keyes, Martin Rein, Maureen Scully, and Xav Briggs in those roles. As expert crafters of cross-disciplinary research that aims to inform practice, these committee members were ideal guides for my initiation. They also inspired deeper thinking and thoughtfulness. Xav Briggs’s early questions about the characterization of the practitioner discussion forums prompted my refined exploration of their functions. Maureen Scully’s always discerning comments and provocative conversations were critical to building the conception of creative street-level practice. I also appreciate Phil Thompson’s urging to couch the project with respect to pressing problems in the broader public policy and administration discourse, a provocation that inspired me to frame the ideas about creative street-level practice in relation to frontline workers’ contributions to the work of governance.

Langley Keyes and Marty Rein’s contributions extended throughout and beyond the dissertation. Their own writing about the inevitability of “practice problems” and the possibility of matching “strategies to saints” form the foundations of this project. The generative debate and deliberation both of these keen students of policy and practice stimulated over the course of my time at DUSP greatly informed this dissertation. Learning from and with them has also shaped my way of thinking and being in the world. Lang Keyes’ persistent encouragement through the extended
iterations of research and writing warrants exuberant gratitude I can only hope to convey by
eulating his intelligent generosity in my own interactions with students and colleagues in the
future.

My involvement in academic communities of practice in additional venues afforded useful
subsstantive comments and the affirmation that the project is part of a broader, collective
endeavor of theory development to inform the work of governance. I am grateful for
illuminating interactions with Rachel Bratt, Bill Rohe, Rachel Kleit, John Forester, Paul Carlile,
Steven Maynard-Moody, and Kate Cooney. The faculty and students of Tufts University's
Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning offered me an invaluable haven
for writing and refining ideas in the final stages of the project. I also wish to acknowledge the
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Early Doctoral Student Research Grant
which supported the research on inter-organizational coordination analyzed in Chapter 4.

The inspiration for this exploration stems from another community I encountered long before I
realized that how frontline human service workers make things happen was a topic for critical
inquiry. The enduring bonds among the women who crafted creative approaches to operating a
job readiness program that was housed in the bungalows of a San Francisco school yard
sensitized me to the value of the practitioner discussion forums that inform this study. Extra
special thanks go to one of these women, my mother, Gail Goldman. I offer her appreciation that
is higher than the sky, deeper than the ocean, and longer than the pages in this volume for
mustering the patience and at least feigned enthusiasm to read and comment on drafts of each
chapter. Her reactions, along with those of the practitioners noted above, helped clarify and
authenticate my depiction of creative street-level practice.

The lesson about the power of camaraderie forged in the collective effort of making a difference
is also critical to the project. I learned this through my personal experience as well as my
observations of the self-sufficiency practitioners. This dissertation would never have been
completed without the support and encouragement of my community of friends who share the
spirit of critical inquiry and know the hard work of writing that aims to be useful to both theory
and practice. I owe much to the intellectual and emotional camaraderie of Dana Brown, Nils
Nordal, Jennifer Hrabchak Molinsky, Jennifer Johnson, Gretchen Weismann, David Greenberg,
Janice Goldman, Jeanine Spence, Aliza Mazor, Kyra Minninger, Kerry Nelson, Andrew Hahn,
Linda Shaw, Lisa Schneier, Bill Schorr, Meir Lakein, Orit Kent, Emily Sper, Peter Shapiro,
Karen Arnold, Liz Reisberg, Becca Gutman, Idit Klein, Barry Ingber, Carole Slipowitz, Amy
Mazur, Toba Spitzer, and other Dorshei Tzedek pursuers of justice. To Gail, Harris, Maxine,
Emily, Judith, and David Goldman, Chris, Lola, and Paloma Leuterio, Madelin Orr, Barbara and
Rabinder Khurana, Dave and Lewis Barnett, Paul and Polly Bresnick, Susan Duff, Peter and Erin
Crysdale, and Brad Paul, I owe appreciation for the support only the bonds of family can sustain.

This project is dedicated to all mentioned here and all others who share the desire and
commitment to be of use. You exemplify poet Marge Piercy’s depiction of those “who strain in
the mud and the muck to move things forward, who do what has to be done, again and again.”

It is my sincere hope that the ideas conveyed in the pages that follow will be of use to the many
creative practitioners who strive to make programs work better. May your creative practice find
many supporters and your work always be real.
To Be of Use

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

Marge Piercy, The Art of Blessing the Day.
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INTRODUCTION

Street-Level Contributions to the Work of Governance
and the Question of Feasible Expectations

This dissertation develops a theory of creative street-level practice to explain how those who work directly with social service clients strive to meet expectations despite imperfect program designs, inadequate resources, and difficult working conditions. It also explores how meeting regularly with others who pursue the same programs in different organizations and places augments frontline workers’ capacity for designing and adopting creative approaches to the challenges of practice.

In this introduction, I make the case for why we need to revise our thinking about what is feasible to expect from “street-level bureaucrats” who, by definition, are the people with the least authority to influence program designs and operations (Lipsky 1980). They are the situated at the bottom of the hierarchy of schools, police bureaus, welfare offices, and other public serving agencies and are thus recipients of directives from their supervisors, agency directors, and policymakers.1 Nevertheless, as Michael Lipsky (1980) has argued, policy intervention is shaped less by the intentions described in official policy regulations than by what these workers actually do in practice. Assumptions about what they typically do account for why these workers have long been considered part of the problem rather than contributors to the solutions of the social problems policies aim to address.

I argue that we need to revisit those assumptions in light of the new, more optimistic, way of thinking about policy intervention and public administration that has been eclipsing foundational theories’ pessimism about how public serving bureaucracies function. Although the scholars and practitioners who promote this new “governance perspective” – that I explicate below – emphasize that multiple actors share responsibility for achieving program goals, they have tended to overlook the potential of street-level workers to take advantage of their knowledge from practice to improve program operations.

1 Lipsky’s definition of street-level bureaucrats includes public servants with professional expertise, such as teachers and lawyers and other “minor professionals” (Rein 1983; Schöon 1983). In contrast, my focus is on frontline service workers who typically lack professional certification or academic credentials. The Annie E. Casey Foundation sponsored survey of human service workers cited below found that only about half of the respondents had college degrees and while nearly one-fourth had completed some studies towards a post-graduate degree, others had less formal education; 18% had not studied beyond high-school. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority responded that they consider themselves to be “professionals.” It is this expertise of practice that is the focus of this study.
Tensions Between New Visions and Demands and Old Images and Disappointments

The tensions between new and optimistic ways of thinking about public intervention and the persistence of previous, mostly pessimistic ways of thinking about the frontline workers who carry out social programs frame the context for this project.

**New Visions and Demands:** Early studies of policy implementation and public administration tended to focus on why things go wrong and stay wrong despite evidence of what needs fixing. As the title of one pioneering book conveys, the core research objective was to understand “how great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland” (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973). Contemporary scholars and practitioners in the fields of public policy and administration are adopting a more optimistic vision for how policy intervention should work and can happen. This new vision both reflects and has influenced how policies and management systems are designed. And these changes raise even greater expectations for what those charged with making programs work in the “Oaklands” around the country are capable of achieving.

The new ways of thinking about public service and policy intervention depart from traditional views in focusing on the processes undertaken in a *dynamic system of governance* rather than the functions of relatively stable *structures of government*. In referring to the growing gap between the government and governance perspectives on public administration, Donald Kettl defines the former as “the structure and function of public institutions” and the latter as “the way government gets the job done” (2002: xi). This attention to the *work of governance* affords a more optimistic assessment of what is feasible to expect system actors to achieve because it invites examination of what getting the job done well entails than do accounts of how their actions have missed the mark. H. George Frederickson’s articulation of this optimism explicates this shift in orientation to the possibility of making things happen:

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2 Several of the scholars cited in this discussion refer to a “system” of governance. I adopt Robert Jervis’ (1997) definition of “system” as a set of units or elements that are perceived as interconnected so that changes in some elements or their relations produce changes in other parts of the system and where the entire system exhibits properties and behaviors that are different from the sum of the parts. Systems also involve feedback mechanisms; they are responsive to the environment and chains of consequences extend over time. The individual actors within systems can also respond proactively to that environment although the ensuing behavior of the aggregate is not necessarily predictable.

3 For additional discussions of this increasingly prevalent view, see H. George Frederickson’s characterization (1996, 1997: 78-94, and Frederickson and Smith 2003:207-28), March and Olsen’s perspectives on governance in their oft cited *Democratic Governance* (1995), and Hajer and Wagemaa’s (2003) discussion of the rise of this vocabulary in the introduction to their edited volume.
Governance implies a dignified, positive contribution to the achievement of public purposes. While government and bureaucracy may be despised, governance is considered acceptable, legitimate, and perhaps even good. Traditional public administration is viewed as hierarchical, slow, and lacking in imagination, while governance is seen as creative and responsive. (1997: 87).

I highlight this quotation because it calls attention to two central principles of the governance perspective. One principle is the idea that the achievement of a public purpose requires actors charged with the work to be responsive. Whereas in traditional, hierarchical public bureaucracies, ensuring accountability entails the exertion of control along the lines of authority, in the system of governance perspective, the voices of multiple actors shape policy expectations (Bardach and Lesser 1996; Behn 2001; deLeon and deLeon 2002; Klinger et al 2002). A web of accountability replaces the hierarchical chain of command (Romzek and Dubnick 1987; Romzek 1996, 2000; Behn 2001) and the policy regulations and procedural manuals are interpreted in relation to a dynamic “expectations context” (Romzek 1996 p. 97) or accountability environment (Kearns 2003). The norms, values, and priorities of the target populations, the providers of related services in other policy domains, client advocates, the court system, the media and members of the general public all have expectations for how policies should be implemented. Appropriate responses to implementation challenges are expected to take into account variations and fluctuations in the local environment.

The second principle implied in Frederick’s remark is the suggestion that these actors should assume responsibility for achieving the public purposes and even that they do so with creative imagination. Rather than simply obeying the directives of those in command and complying with proper procedures, the system of governance perspective requires actors to be proactive and strategic to make sure that their responses yield the desired results (Kearns 1994; L. DeLeon 1998, 2003; Gregory 2003). In Robert Gregory’s (2003) distinction, ensuring accountability within traditional government structures means “minimizing misgovernment and preventing wrong-doing” whereas assuming responsibility for the work of governance entails “maximizing good government and generating outstanding success.” Moreover, public management publications increasingly proclaim the possibility of reinventing or breaking through the bureaucracy, transforming governance, and creating public value (Osborne and Gaebler 1992, Barzelay 1992, Kettl 2002, Moore 1995).
Policy designs and administrative structures informed by these principles pose demands on local officials and agencies that have implications for street-level workers. To allow system actors to be responsive to other stakeholders and the implementation environment, policies and programs increasingly grant local actors more discretion than traditional designs (Conlan 1998, Kettl 2000; Milward and Provan 2000). As street-level practitioners tend to be in closest contact with the target population and other local stakeholders and are often the first to observe the implications of changing economic or policy trends, many contemporary policies also extend wider discretion to them as well. Expanded flexibility for refining programs is also a common mechanism for encouraging public sector innovation. Although such flexibility, and the accompanying incentives for meeting performance goals, tends to target agency executives, management experts have recognized that frontline workers’ knowledge about their clients, communities, and practice is a vital resource for problem solving efforts (Moore 1995; Light 1998; Sparrow 2000).

Old Images and Disappointments of Street-Level Service Workers: Despite the implications of the governance perspective for those at the frontlines of the dynamic system, we are still stuck in the old ways of thinking about what they are willing to do and capable of doing. This pessimism persists in both popular culture and the academic discourse about bureaucratic behavior.

Negative impressions of street-level public servants remain prevalent in popular culture and influence common assumptions about their attitudes and behavior (Wood and Waterman 1994; LeGrand 2003). One such image features the unwillingness of street-level workers to do what is expected of them. We see film versions of Herman Melville’s short story about Bartleby the Scrivener who repeatedly declares that he would “prefer not to” fulfill his obligations of his role of clerk. Another common image emphasizes street-level bureaucrats’ inability to meet the expectations. The media frequently highlights overwhelmed public servants whose attempts to manage with scarce resources lead them to overlook critical cases, disregard violations, and repeatedly fail to prevent tragedies the policies are designed to prevent. Child welfare workers are typical in this regard. While press reports sometimes identify poor management as the cause of the problem or accuse the parents or guardians of irresponsibility, the workers almost always share part of that blame casting.

4 The most recent was the 2001 film adaptation written and directed by Jonathan Parker.
The cross-disciplinary canon of theories about street-level bureaucracy essentially reinforces these stereotypes. Principal-agency theory contends that, like Bartleby, frontline workers are inclined to pursue their self-interest to shirk responsibilities or even sabotage program goals (Niskansen 1971, Alchian and Desetz 1972, Heclo 1977, Wilson 1989, Wood and Waterman 1994). In contrast, Lipsky’s (1980) argument is more aligned with the image of the overburdened child welfare worker. He argues that street-level bureaucrats resort to coping mechanisms rather than contend with impossible to achieve policy expectations and the strains of overly taxing work requirements. In both of these prevailing theories, those on the frontlines of traditionally hierarchical public serving bureaucracies consistently fail to meet expectations. By implication, the theories predict that the more extensive discretion of policy designs and management systems informed by the new governance perspective will yield even greater disappointments.

To some extent, recent empirical research has attenuated the pessimism of the abstract generalizations in the prevailing theories of bureaucratic theory (eg. Brehm and Gates 1997; Vinzant and Crothers 1998; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 2003; Sandfort 2000, Cooney 2007). Indeed, I build on these critiques to develop my theory of creative street-level practice. Yet as I argue in the following chapter, these critiques of the canon do not go far enough to dismiss the expectation that street-level workers participating in the system of governance will frequently fail to be the responsive and responsible actors the system of governance demands. Nor do the accounts of public entrepreneurship noted above defy the stereotypes of self-interested shirkers and sabotagers or overloaded copers. Where frontline services are mentioned, they tend to be helpers to innovative executives rather than initiators of strategic problem solving (Moore 1995; Sparrow 2000; Light 1998; Borins 2000).  

In short, there is a tension between the new visions and demands of the governance perspective on public management and the persistent old images and disappointments about street-level workers’ participation in public intervention.

The Importance of Revisiting What Is Feasible to Expect From Street-Level Bureaucrats

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5 Sandford Borins’ (2000) survey of the Ford Foundation’s “Innovations in American Government Awards Program” identified 17 frontline workers among the 104 awardees from 1995 through 1998 and over half of those programs were initiated together with mid-level managers. Borins' study does not specify these frontline workers' contributions to these innovative initiatives or how they are different from those who occupy other positions.
Taking a fresh look at the behavior of workers on the frontlines of public serving bureaucracies is important for several reasons. These workers comprise an increasingly critical resource of public intervention and they represent a growing and beleaguered workforce. Their efforts are also a source of untapped potential for making policies and programs work better.

*A Critical Resource:* The disconnect between our understanding of what street-level workers are willing and able to contribute to the work of governance and the demands contemporary policies and management practices tend to place on them suggests that we need to revisit theories about street-level behavior. Understanding what is feasible to expect from them is also important because their salaries represent such a large part of the public’s investment in addressing social problems. The principle of fiscal austerity that accompanies the governance perspective’s emphasis on ingenuity means that fewer resources are being devoted to budget lines other than essential personnel.

An additional reason to pay more attention to these workers is that they comprise a considerable part of the nation’s workforce. Estimates count over 2.5 million frontline human service workers employed in public and nonprofit agencies, a figure nearly comparable to the size of the federal government’s entire civilian workforce (Light 2003). In fact, 2.4% of American households have at least one wage earner employed in the fields of childcare, youth services, employment and training alone. Moreover, these workers serve those most in need of help. About two-thirds work directly with low-income children, youth, and families. In the words of an Annie E. Casey Foundation report on the status of this workforce, “Frontline social services workers are the heart and soul of our nation’s publicly funded human service system” (2003: 1).

Social service jobs are also the fastest growing sector in today’s economy. Official estimates predict an increase of 41% between 1998 and 2008 as opposed to only 15% in US industries over all (Annie E. Casey 2003).\(^6\) However, this increase pales in relation to the demand for these workers’ services. In Massachusetts alone, projections indicate a need for an additional 39,000 service workers within ten years (Citino, Goodman, Morzuch, and Moore 2007). Demographic trends, including the service needs of an aging population, account for some of this shortage. High turnover among human service workers and declining interest in

\(^6\) A study of Massachusetts’ human service workers estimates that they comprise 3.5 percent of the state’s workforce and between 2003 and 2004, the industry experienced a 6 percent increase in employment as opposed to less than 1 percent increase overall (Citino, Goodman, Morzuch, and Moore 2007).
entering service fields is an additional factor (Light 2003; Citino et al 2007). Explanations for turnover include heavy workloads, long hours, and increasing responsibilities coupled with relatively low salaries, limited opportunity for career advancement, and poor supervision with little guidance or support (Annie E. Casey 2003; Citino et al 2006, 2007).

The “Critical Condition” of the Workforce: A first of its kind survey of human service workers commissioned by the Annie E. Casey foundation with the assistance of the Brookings Institution’s Center for Public Service led to the diagnosis that this workforce as in “critical condition” (Light 2003). Survey respondents reported attitudes about their work resembled those of the overburdened case-worker more than the recalcitrant Bartleby. The majority said they are dissatisfied, frustrated, overworked, insufficiently trained, and under-appreciated. Many plan to abandon their positions in the near future and these include a disproportionately large portion of the better educated workers in the sample. However, the majority of respondents nevertheless indicated that they are committed to improving the lives of the people they serve and cherish the chance to accomplish something worthwhile and service their community. An effective prescription for this malaise depends on more than a description of the problem. We need a better understanding of what is feasible for them to contribute and what we can do to make it easier for them to do so.

Untapped Potential: The suggestion that at least some frontline workers want to make a positive contribution is perhaps the most significant reason to explore what is feasible for them to do. Indeed, popular culture offers some alternative images of street-level workers who live up to the principles of responsiveness and responsibility and even raise expectations beyond the narrow visions of their colleagues and supervisors.

Akiru Kurosawa’s film, *Ikiru* tells the story of a typical public clerk’s emergence from the myopia of minimalist compliance with arcane regulations to respond to a group of citizens’ repeatedly dismissed requests for the construction of a public park. The clerk takes responsibility by entreating his colleagues throughout the municipal bureaucracy to use their discretion to overcome the bureaucratic hurdles of divided departmental responsibilities and

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7 The survey, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associations was based on a sample selected from 220,000 screening calls generated through random digit dialing to reach all American households. It found 1,432 households who identified themselves as being employed in at least one of the fields the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Human Service Workforce Initiative targeted for the study (Light 2003). These areas of child welfare, childcare, juvenile justice, youth services, and employment and training, are those in which the foundation has the most experience and considered the interactions between workers and families to be most consequential (Annie E. Casey, 2003).
make the park a reality. He raises expectations from his co-workers in order to meet the expectations of the citizens. In the film, *Stand and Deliver*, an inner-city high school teacher takes on responsibility for teaching his students advanced algebra and calculus despite the principal and other teachers’ low expectations of what is feasible for these students to achieve. He develops innovative curriculum and teaching methods and finds the resources to add additional course instruction. When the students pass the advanced placement tests, they raise their own expectations for what they can achieve and send a strong message that it is feasible to expect much more from our education systems.

Both of these characters do more rather than less than what is expected from them as stipulated in their contracts and official job descriptions. Their proactive responses to the needs of those they are committed to serving inspire them to improve upon standard operating procedures to create additional public value. We witness their personal transformation as their capacity to engage in this work develops in the course of their efforts and their charismatic leadership. Yet neither the clerk nor the teacher is a fully integrated system participant. Both faced opposition from supervisors and colleagues who never fully embraced their innovative initiatives. In fact, despite the film’s title that means “to live,” *Ikiru*’s public clerk dies after the park is inaugurated with little indication that his more traditional colleagues will follow in his innovative footsteps. The fate of the teacher is less dismal, although he strains his health to continue his efforts and the character’s real life counterpart eventually abandoned the long term change agenda when ongoing disagreements with school system superiors made standing and delivering too difficult.

Their efforts helped many people, yet they did not move to scale after the death or retirement of the heroes. Nor did they actively model their approaches for other clerks and teachers. Consequently, these superheroes of the moment were not change agents of the future. In Langley Keyes’ (1992) terms, they are the “saints” of public bureaucracies or the extraordinary people who deliver on the promise of social programs despite the enormous challenges of the institutional environment. Yet to paraphrase Keyes, a system of governance

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*8 1988 film based on the story of Jaime Escalante, a calculus teacher at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles. By 1990, Escalante’s math enrichment program involved over 400 students in classes ranging from beginning algebra to advanced calculus. Escalante and his fellow teachers referred to their program as “the dynasty,” boasting that it would someday involve more than 1,000 students. However, when Escalante left the school following disputes with the administration, the program withered and attempts to replicate the success in other high schools met with only partial success.*

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cannot rely on a few saints; to know what is feasible to expect from ordinary street-level service workers, we need to understand the strategies that such saints use intuitively. We also need to know what it takes to channel and sustain their efforts so that they are responsive to system actors and the changing environment and assume responsibility for making programs work.

Looking more closely at the efforts of the stereotypical characters, we can see untapped potential that could be channeled in more positive directions. Bartleby makes an enormous effort to avoid doing what he is told to do. His refusal to work actually exhibits persistence that, if directed towards program goals, could conceivably help resolve challenges. Although we are not informed of the purpose of the paperwork he refuses to copy, there may even be a valid reason for his "preferring not to" follow the directives. Yet even if he is a conscientious objector, we do not get a sense of what it would take to guide him to become a conscientious contributor. This observation raises the question of what inspires frontline workers to choose working rather than shirking. Reflecting on Bartleby's implied back story raises related questions. It seems that he was once a dedicated clerk but we do not know why his commitment flagged or what sustaining the motivation to be of service might entail.

The overwhelmed caseworker is clearly committed to the principles of responsiveness and responsibility. In fact, the weight of her burden derives, in part, from her efforts to uphold those principles despite the flawed policy designs and difficult working conditions. But reading the media reports (and considering the survey results), we are unsure whether the worker should be blamed for not making enough of an effort or for not making the right effort. Nor do we know whether the clients are to blame, or alternatively, where the policy design, budget resources, and local management are the source of the failure. It would be good to know how street-level workers might direct their limited energies more effectively, despite less than optimal conditions.

These possibly wasted and misdirected efforts are especially unfortunate in light of the increasing importance of street-level workers' roles. It is also incongruous with the deeply rooted American ideal of meritocracy; we honor accomplishments that are products of obstacles overcome more than easy wins (Coleman and Rainwater 1978; Young 1994; Sennett 1998). In fact, promoting the ideal of hard work is the goal of many of the social programs these workers are charged with carrying out.

A plan for investing in the human service workforce thus needs revised theories about what is feasible to expect street-level workers to contribute as actors in the system of governance. We
need to know why it is hard and why some are able to take on the challenges. We also need to identify the strategies to do it and what street-level workers need in order to employ the strategies effectively. And we need to know more about what inspires and sustains the workers to engage in this effort persistently, despite the inevitable challenges of making imperfect programs work in less than optimal conditions.

The Tasks of Street-Level Participation in Governance

To structure my inquiry into what is feasible to expect from frontline service workers as participants in the system of governance, I translate the principles of responsiveness and responsibility into the tasks upholding them entail. This focus on tasks allows me to examine how they exert effort to contribute to the work of governance. As J. Q. Wilson (1989) argues, tasks are fundamental to understanding how bureaucracies work and particularly how frontline workers determine what they are supposed to do. Wilson highlights tasks because he wants to distinguish the work bureaucratic organizations are charged with doing from the articulated policy goals. Organizational actors operationalize policy goals into tasks that can actually be pursued by taking into account the “situational imperatives” that influence what is feasible to do given the available program technologies, the predominant culture of the workplace, and the norms set by their peers.

The tasks that operationalize the principles of responsiveness and responsibility are more abstract and generalizable across programmatic contexts than the program specific ones Wilson asks us to examine. But articulating them in terms of tasks similarly highlights the work of pursuing the ideals in the context of multiple actors, pressing “situational imperatives,” and well established norms of practice. Thus these tasks are to the principles of governance as Wilsons’ are to goals of particular policies and both make the workers’ efforts that eventually lead to outcomes more explicit. I return to Wilson’s focus on policy goals, program technologies, and organizing structures in Chapter 2 where I elucidate the challenges of engaging in the work of governance in the context of the two self-sufficiency programs and I look more closely at the constructive roles of peers later in this chapter.

The Task of Discerning Appropriateness: Being responsive to other system actors and the implementation environment entails discerning what is appropriate rather than simply complying with regulations and obeying directives. This task requires system actors to identify to whom
they are accountable, how diverse actors interpret the policy objectives, and what should be done to achieve them. Moreover, meeting these expectations necessitates determining how to respond when concerns and priorities conflict (Romzek and Dubnick 1987; Bardach and Lesser 1996; Kearns 2003; Mulgan 2003). Exacerbating this challenge, these interpretations are made in a changing environment and are thus subject to revision in response to new developments or changing perceptions of what works and what is acceptable. Consequently, accountability is a dynamic system that is continuously evolving (Aucoin and Heintzman 2000; Richardson 2002; Gregory 2003; Ebrahim 2005). It requires actors to decide which expectations to meet and which to ignore, redefine, or defer as well as whether to adopt a reactive, adaptive, or strategic level of activism in response to the particular aspect of policy intervention they are responsible for performing (Romzek 1996).

My project examines how street-level actors, who have limited authority and recognized expertise, discern what course of action is appropriate when they are confronted with difficult demands and conflicting priorities.

The Task of Improving Program Operations: Assuming responsibility for achieving results rather than following specified procedures involves the task of problem solving and innovation. This task also requires actors to assess whether their innovative solutions are indeed improvements. Assessment is particularly challenging when outcomes are difficult to measure or when results are apparent only after considerable time has passed, as is the case in many social programs (Ebrahim 2005). My project investigates the extent to which frontline workers, with limited access to resources or influence over other actors, and no training in program assessment, engage in the task of improving program operations and ascertaining that their modifications are valuable contributions. I identify the strategies they employ to take advantage of available resources and influence others to help them.

The Task of Developing Capacities: Engaging in this work of governance necessitates that system actors have the requisite capabilities for doing so. The task of responding to clients’ needs, partners’ demands, and environmental contingencies depends on the capacity to relate to others and interpret what is seen, heard, and experienced in light of the relevant norms, values, and priorities as well as the official policy directives. To assume responsibility for improving programs, actors need the skills to apply their knowledge towards designing and assessing alternatives to established operations. Thus the governance perspective relies on an additional
principle that the people involved in the work are able to develop those capabilities (March and Olsen 1995; Aucoin and Heinman 2000).

In this sense, the governance perspective decisively stands with Friedrich’s (1940) endorsement of professionalism tempered by popular sentiment as the basis for accountability and responsibility over Finer’s (1941) argument for formal external controls on policy actors (Lynn 1996; Fredrickson 1997; Roberts 2003; Feldman and Khandemian 2001, 2002). Some governance scholars take this endorsement of broad participation in decision-making still further to posit that non-professionals – especially those who have the most intimate experience of the policy problems and whose lives stand to be the most affected by the interventions – have much to contribute to the work of governance (DeLeon and DeLeon 2002; L. DeLeon 2003; March and Olsen 1995; Fung and Wright 2003).

This idea expands on the long-held conviction that citizen participation enhances public officials’ accountability. Not only can ordinary people voice their opinions about what should be done; they can develop the skills to formulate and articulate new proposals persuasively (Arenstein 1969, Pateman 1970, Barrett and Fudge 1981). Proponents of such inclusive participation in governance work posit that the opportunity to engage in public deliberation also enhances people’s capacity to figure out what course of action is desirable to address policy concerns (Smith and Ingram 1993; Landy 1993; Bohman 1996; Roberts 1997; Fearon 1998; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Bingham, Nabatachi, and O’Leary 2005). Articulating norms and values and discussing diverse perspectives enables participants to deepen their understanding of problems and frame proposals to further agreed upon goals.

In addition, some contend that deliberating together develops participants’ critical reasoning skills, sharpens their awareness of moral dilemmas and strengthens their identity as engaged citizens (Fearon 1998; Forester 1999; March and Olsen 1995). In Fearon’s formulation, joining with others to influence policy directions is a “sort of exercise program for developing human or civic virtues” that cultivates collective ownership over the new direction and a sense of group solidarity and united commitment to implementation (1998: 59). Involvement in deliberative processes may also transform participants’ sense of self- and collective-efficacy so that even those without recognized authority are empowered to take action and to take action together (Ingram and Smith 1993; Fung and Wright 2003). Deliberation thus extends the principle of
responsiveness to the public into a more collaborative acceptance of responsibility for improving the work of intervention itself.

My project explores how deliberation with others is a means to enhance street-level workers’ capacity to engage in the work of governance. Bringing people together to deliberate and act together is not the only way to develop the capacity to discern what is appropriate and improve programs. The infusion of new funding streams, the appointment of more entrepreneurial leaders and more professional staff, and the competitive selection of higher performing organizations are all means to introduce capacity enhancing resources. More coercive strategies include performance-based funding and funders’ mandates to coordinate and collaborate. Moreover, radical reforms may well require considerably more intensive policy learning processes and deeper structural changes than is feasible through deliberating and acting together. As the least costly and most accessible strategy for capacity development, however, joining forces for critical reasoning and concerted effort is particularly suited to street-level workers who must rely on their own devices to become more constructive contributors.

Frontline service workers tend to work in isolation from one another and do not typically belong to trade associations or have other opportunities to engage with others in ways that develop their capacity to do more than carry out established routines for inter-organizational service delivery (H. Hill 2003; Light 2003). Although street-level practitioners may be present at events that convene other stakeholders, their unique contributions are rarely the focus of attention. Furthermore, new forms of “empowered participatory governance” (Fung and Wright 2003) not withstanding, such contexts for public deliberation tend to focus on direction setting rather than the resolution of practice problems that stand in the way of pursuing already delineated policy objectives.9 Thus my inquiry also explores the organizing structures that occasion this type of interaction.

In sum, this dissertation explores the question of how street-level practitioners pursue each of these tasks: the task of discerning appropriate responses to the challenges of practice, the task of improving program operations, and the task of developing their capacity to do so. I develop a

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9 Pateman’s (1970) classic on participatory democracy is another exception that references frontline workers’ contributions, although she focuses on the industrial rather than public service sector. Others focus on administrators with credentialed professional expertise atypical of frontline human service workers (Forester 1999; Laws and Rein 2003; Wagenaar 2004) or on the job learning or other training to enhance workers’ proficiency to accomplish their appointed tasks rather than to expand their capacity to engage in appropriate improvements to ongoing operations (Raelin 1997; H. Hill 2003).
theory of creative street-level practice that explains what is feasible to expect street-level workers, with limited authority to influence others and little access to resources, to contribute to this work of governance. I examine how discussion forums afford practitioners, who operate the same programs in different organizations and places, a chance to deliberate together about challenges and triumphs. And I suggest that these forums enhance the capacity for creative street-level practice, both for the individual members of the community of practice and as a collective.

The remainder of this chapter presents my approach to pursuing this inquiry.

My Approach to Developing a Definition of Creative Street-Level Practice and a Theory about How It Works

This project is a product of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1997, Eisenhardt 1989). It was inspired by my interactions with frontline practitioners who defied the stereotypes characterized earlier. My observations of the bi-monthly meetings where practitioners of two self-sufficiency programs gathered to talk about their responses to the challenges encountered in practice informed the two components of this project. What I heard in forum discussions guided my critique of prevailing theories of street-level behavior and prompted me to try to understand frontline practitioners’ potential to improve programs and their operations. My observations of their meetings and my conversations with them guided the development of the idea of creative street-level practice as a means for street-level actors to participate productively in the work of governance.

Analysis of my empirical observations allowed me to push these ideas further to elaborate a theory of how creative street-level practice works and how participation in discussion forums enhances practitioners’ capacity to engage in creative street-level practice. Together, the idea of creative street-level practice and the understanding of the conditions that are conducive to its practice form the beginnings of an answer to the questions of what is feasible to expect street-level practitioners to contribute to the work of responsive and responsible governance and how their capacity to contribute gets better in the course of their efforts.

I begin the description of my research approach with an account of my “discovery” of street-level creativity and the practitioner discussion forums because – like creative street-level practice itself – the iterative process of becoming aware of a problem and being inspired by possibilities
for addressing it is integral to the pursuit of solutions and their eventual products. I then describe each of the components of the project and the methods of observation and analysis that support the inquiry.

**Discovering Creative Street-Level Practice and the Practitioner Discussion Forums:**

I “discovered” street-level creativity and practitioner discussion forums while I was researching the effects of variation in organizational capacity on the quality of services people receive in different localities. I had selected the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program as the policy context for the research because the program, mandated by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), afforded local housing agencies considerable flexibility in designing and operating the program. As I elaborate in a subsequent chapter, FSS is an example of programs that aim to promote participants’ long-term economic independence from public assistance instead of satisfying immediate needs or altering the structural factors that influence poverty and inequality. While some agencies’ programs adopted innovative strategies for helping clients achieve self-sufficiency that were acknowledged with “best practice awards,” others followed the minimal specifications of HUD’s regulations, and some agencies were reluctant to offer the program at all (Sard 2000).

In the summer of 1999, I started attending the meetings of the group of frontline practitioners who operate the FSS program in the eight regional nonprofit low-income housing organizations that, along with other programs, contract with the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to administer its rental housing voucher subsidies. Initially, I was looking for exploratory cases to flesh out my ideas about the effects of organizational capacity and characteristics of service delivery systems on program performance. As I listened to these bi-monthly discussions and talked with practitioners following the meetings, I was increasingly struck by how much of the responsibility for FSS implementation rested on these frontline practitioners and how isolated they were in their efforts to make programs work. Yet what drew me to attend these meetings regularly was the sense that an important facet of organizational capacity to meet the high expectations of the programs was being pursued not at the organizational level, as I had initially assumed, but by the practitioners at and across the frontlines of these organizations.

Not only were these street-level actors identifying problems with program designs and standard operating procedures; they were also devising resourceful approaches to addressing
them. Their inventions were not as astounding as those of the heroes of *Ikiru* or *Stand and Deliver*. It was not even entirely clear that they resulted in definitively better outcomes for clients. But it was certainly apparent that they were improving ongoing practice in ways they considered to benefit the clientele instead of resorting to coping mechanisms like the overburdened caseworkers. And unlike Bartleby, they were certainly not sabotaging the program and shirking their duties. On the contrary, even attending the meetings was beyond the minimum obligation of service and their discussions evidenced their commitment to doing much more.

Among the most impressive innovations were the new program elements many of the practitioners introduced to meet client needs not recognized in the official program designs. For example, one of the practitioners developed an emergency loan fund with capital she and her clients raised from bake sales, raffle tickets, flea markets, and local business contributions. Other new program elements included a “career closet” of donated professional clothing for FSS participants to wear to job interviews, mentoring relationships with community members, peer support groups, and a variety of workshops on financial literacy, work and family balance, building self-esteem, and other topics.

I also heard about changes the practitioners introduced to FSS specific and Section 8 administrative procedures to overcome challenges of program outreach, inadequate job training and supportive services, motivating clients to sustain the effort of pursuing their self-sufficiency objectives, and other complexities of FSS practice. Some examples of creative responses to what, following Martin Rein (1983), I call “practice problems,” were more subtle, observable only over time and to those with the sensibilities to see the difference they make towards meeting the high expectations of the FSS program and its implementation.

In addition to hearing about individual forum members’ practice improvements, I also observed the group’s dynamics. I came to see that the discussion forum was a venue for the practitioners to share information and exchange ideas for their peers to adopt in their own organizations. I observed them deliberating together about practice problems and new ideas for addressing them. Although this deliberation was not always in the format of the facilitated public deliberation among citizens characterized by the aforementioned theorists, it did sharpen awareness of moral and practical dilemmas, foster learning, and promote new ways of working.
On occasion, forum members also joined forces to pursue novel projects collectively. Working together as a group, the practitioners established a two-day annual retreat for program participants, secured specially designated childcare vouchers for FSS participants from the state, and arranged for numerous training programs for themselves to supplement what they were able to learn from one another. Perhaps most impressively, the FSS coordinators earned regional and national awards for a loan program they established together with a regional bank and nonprofit credit counseling program. The loans totaling over $500,000, assistance in debt consolidation, and subsequent improved credit scores exceeded what the practitioners were able to accomplish on their own for their individual programs.

I also sensed that the personal bonds formed between members of the discussion forums had established a community. They came together because they each cared about improving their self-sufficiency practice and serving their clients. But they also clearly cared for one another.

Not all of the efforts to respond to practice problems – either as individuals or as the collective – constituted improvements to practice. As an outsider to self-sufficiency practice, I was not always convinced that their novel practices were valuable. Forum members did not always replicate practices heard from their colleagues, even when they considered them worth adopting. Other attempts were aborted when those with greater decision maker authority decided they conflicted with other priorities. The practitioners did not always pursue their creative ideas and sometimes abandoned them once they were underway. Although the collective efforts of the group often helped to overcome obstacles to designing novel ideas and putting them into practice, working together was not always enough. Nor did their deliberation about practice problems fully resolve uncertainty and ambiguity that sometimes interfered with their capacity to seek creative solutions.

**Research Shaping Questions from the Observations:** What I learned from all these observations -- the clearly and the questionably successful practices and the aborted and abandoned ideas for practice -- is that these practitioners were making an effort to be responsive to their clients and other system actors. They were making an effort to improve practice so that they could assume responsibility for being responsive to the entire clientele and for meeting more of their needs. That these efforts did not always result in obvious outcomes for clients and sometimes failed to come to fruition was certainly not surprising given the practitioners’
positions and expertise. Indeed, the evidence of all of these efforts raised questions similar to those I surfaced in describing the characters from popular culture.

The questions that surfaced while reflecting on what I heard the practitioners say they did in response to practice problems helped to further specify and structure my research.

**Is what they are doing valuable?** To answer this question, I sought a framework for assessing the practitioners' contributions that took into account what was feasible to expect from them. I also needed a way to discern whether the changes and additions to established ways of working were indeed valuable in the absence of measurable client outcomes or the means to connect client outcomes to practitioners' actions.

**How do they do it?** This question required identifying the strategies street-level practitioners could employ given available resources and limited influence. It also raised the question of their capacity to employ the strategies.

**When can they do it and how much can they do?** To answer these questions I needed to examine the effects of policy designs features and characteristics of the organizations, service delivery systems, and broader social, economic, and policy environments in which the practitioners pursued their efforts to contribute to the work of governance. Having identified participation in the discussion forums as critical venues for deliberation about practice, I also wanted to know how they contributed to practitioners' capacity to improve practice.

**How do they develop their capacity and sustain their efforts to do it?** I also wanted to address the third task of governance – developing the capacity to improve practice and to discern the appropriateness of responses to dilemma of practice. And I sought to learn more about the challenge each of the cultural icons faced in sustaining as well as directing their motivation to be of service.

*An Initial Theory of Creative Street-Level Practice:* The first part of the dissertation takes on the first of these questions and facets of the second and third. I craft the definition of *street-level creativity* and the idea of *creative street-level practice* from constructive criticism of interdisciplinary scholarship on bureaucratic behavior among frontline workers and with the conceptual handles and modes of inquiry I import from social psychology and organizational theory. My observations guided the critique of the literature on street-level behavior and helped me distinguish constraints that demarcate what is impossible from challenges that might be overcome.
I adopt the idea of creativity – defined as novel and valued departures from established routines (Amabile 1983; Amabile et al 1996; Ford 1996) – to delineate what is possible for street-level actors to do instead of the goal-detracting behaviors of classical bureaucracy theory on the one hand, and the frequently unrealistic entrepreneurial innovations of public executives, on the other hand. The discourse on communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, Brown and Duguid 1991, Wenger 1998, Wenger et al 2002) provided a way of thinking about the practitioner discussion forums as venues for facilitating creative street-level practice and learning more generally.

My critique of the prevailing theories of frontline bureaucracy and the more recent, empirically-based attenuations of the pessimistic abstractions also provided building blocks of the theory of creative street-level practice. In addition to identifying key obstacles, it surfaced potential resources in the implementation environment, in the policy designs, and in the workers’ knowledge from practice that are the basis for the strategies of street-level creativity.

**How Creative Street-Level Practice Works:** In the second part of the project, I analyze my empirical observations to elaborate how creative street-level practice works. I substantiate the claims about the feasibility of creative street-level practice and examine how the creative practices pursued by the individual practitioners and the forums constitute contributions to the work of governance. Yet the main objective is to seek answers to the remaining questions about the street-level practitioners efforts. I identify the kinds of departures from established procedures and official regulations the practitioners pursue and the value the practitioners perceive these departures to generate. I characterize the processes of engaging in creative street-level practice and the role of the practitioner discussion forums in facilitating the process and the products of their efforts.

This part of the project provides the taking off point for future research on the feasibility of creative street-level practice in other policy and implementation contexts.

**Methods of Observation and Analysis**

*The Programs:* The Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) practitioners, whose creative efforts I sketched above, are the central research subjects for this project. In addition, I study creative practice in the context of the Welfare-to-Work Voucher Program, known in Massachusetts as JOBLink, that was implemented by the same eight regional nonprofit housing agencies under
contract with the state’s Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). Both of these programs are opportune contexts for investigating street-level creativity because -- like the broader self-sufficiency paradigm they exemplify – they set high expectations for frontline workers to participate in the work of governance. They require them to be especially responsive to clients, other system actors, and the economic and policy environment. They must assume at least some responsibility for adjusting programs to meet the needs of individual clients, and they pose numerous practice problems that could – and as I have already suggested, do – trigger creative practice instead of the more familiar resort to coping mechanisms. Moreover, implementing the programs entails learning new ways of working just to get the rules right and do the right thing for individual clients as well as engaging in creative practice to make the programs work better.

I investigate both of these programs in order to learn about the feasibility of creative street-level practice in programs that grant frontline practitioners different degrees of discretion and command different levels of attention and support from managers and directors in their agencies. JOBLink has similar goals and comparable program technologies as FSS and is operated in the same context. Yet it is considerably more regulation-intensive and because, unlike FSS, it generates revenue for the housing agencies, decision makers at all levels were more attentive to its implementation. I describe these program designs and the implications for street-level practice in the second chapter of Part I of the dissertation.

The Practitioner Discussion Forums: The practitioner discussion forum referenced above is also central to the research design. It was both a subject of analysis as an organizing structure for fostering creative street-level practice and an instrument for my empirical observations. The FSS practitioners’ forum, the comparable one attended by the JOBLink practitioners, and a similar forum comprised of FSS practitioners from public housing authorities throughout Massachusetts afforded me a chance to hear these street-level workers discuss their experiences implementing the self-sufficiency programs and their efforts to make them work better, both as individuals and collectively as communities of practice.

The period of the JOBLink program implementation (2000-2005) demarcates the core study period of my project, a timeframe that also encompasses several key turning points in the broader policy and economic context that I detail in the following chapters. During this period, I attended a total of 61 meetings of the three discussion forums (See Table II-A in the Introduction.
to Part 2). I extend the investigation backwards in history through analysis of minutes, annual reports, and other documents dating back to the beginning of FSS implementation in 1994 as well as interviews with former FSS practitioners. To further elucidate key findings, I sometimes draw from meetings and events that have occurred subsequently.

These discussions were my primary window onto self-sufficiency practice. I also conducted multiple, extensive interviews with all of the nonprofit practitioners and many of the public forum members. There is some overlap in membership across all three forums as some of the smaller MNPHA agencies employed the same person to operate both of the self-sufficiency programs and because the public forum invites their nonprofit counterparts to participate. This overlap afforded common reference points for me to integrate the practitioners’ feedback about the initial formulations of my ideas into the analysis presented in the following chapters. The same principle of learning from and with practitioners guided other aspects of the analysis. When their conclusions appeared to contradict their previous remarks, I asked the group for clarification and reflected back to them what I had heard at previous meetings. My custom of following up with practitioners after the meetings afforded opportunities to discuss their interpretations of the events, including developments over time and contrasts among the participants from the different agencies.

These exchanges also allowed me to verify that my transcripts of the meetings were accurate. I also shared my coding and analysis process with the practitioners, a habit that frequently challenged and deepened my thinking more than my highly useful computer-assisted qualitative data analysis system.

Supplementary Data Sources: I supplemented what I observed in these meetings and learned from conversations with the practitioners with interviews with the Rental Assistance directors of the nonprofit housing agencies and additional key actors along the institutional hierarchy of the agencies, DHCD, and the MNPHA and across departments in each of the MNPHA organizations. In addition, I analyzed Section 8 and FSS administrative data bases, including the annual reports DHCD assembled for the FSS program for submittal to HUD dating back to the onset of the program in 1993/4. I also studied agency publications, promotional materials,

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10 I tape recorded some of the meetings and interviews and took near verbatim notes of others. Forum participants reviewed portions of many of these transcripts to ensure their accuracy.

11 I used Atlas.ti software for coding and memo writing and followed prescriptions of Richards and Richards 1994 as well as Weiss’ (1994) recommendations for coding and analyzing interview data.
internal memos and meeting minutes pertinent to FSS and JOBLink. To learn about the differences across the service delivery systems, I interviewed state-level directors of programs that serve the FSS clientele as well as several of the most prominent service providing agencies in each region. I also gathered and analyzed service guidebooks prepared by the United Way for each catchment area.

**Historical and Comparative Analysis of Responses to Practice Problems:** The second part of the dissertation project uses this data to analyze the practitioners’ responses to three practice problems I detail in the introduction to Part II. I employ two primary modes of analysis. One is historical; I trace the practitioners’ and the forums responses over time to examine the process of creative practice in relation to different stages of the program’s lifecycle, trends and events in the implementation environment, and developments in the creative practices themselves. The other method is comparative. In addition to drawing comparisons between the practitioners’ efforts to improve the more flexible FSS program and the more regulated JOBLink program, I use comparative analysis to investigate how practitioners employ strategies differently in various organizational and environmental contexts. I compare efforts of individual practitioners with those pursued collectively and I also compare and contrast the nonprofit and public FSS forums. This contrast highlights different leadership styles of the practitioner forums, both with respect to relationships among forum members and between the forum and other system actors.

I describe the methods used to analyze responses to each practice problem in greater depth in the introduction to Part II.

**The Structure of the Dissertation**

The dissertation has three major sections. Part I is the theoretical investigation described above. It includes a chapter about street-level behavior, including my theory of creative street-level practice, and a chapter that situates the investigation of street-level contributions to the work of governance in the context of the self-sufficiency policy designs. This discussion of policy designs forms a bridge between the questions about behavior and the investigation of practice. As I explicate in the Introduction to Part I, policy designs shape the expectations street-level workers are charged with meeting, influence the practice problems they encounter as they strive to do so, and provide the materials for creative responses to them.
Part II contains the chapters that analyze the practitioners’ responses to three practice problems: the challenges of enrolling clients, the challenge of linking them to services, and the challenge of sustaining their motivation to pursue self-sufficiency goals. The five chapters pursue the questions about how creative practice works and how the forums facilitate that practice.

Part III synthesizes findings from each of the previous chapters to draw conclusions about the feasibility of creative street-level practice as I observed it in these programs, their organizational, geographical and historical contexts, and these practitioner discussion forums. This final chapter also recommends directions for future research for generalizing these findings to additional policy and implementation environments and for further elaborating the theories about what street-level workers can contribute to the work of governance. I also raise implications for policy and practice.
PART I: FROM PROBLEMS TO POSSIBILITIES

I begin my inquiry in the same way the practitioners engage in creative street-level practice. I start by examining problems and exploring potential resources and strategies for constructive responses to them. In the process, I refine expectations for what is possible to achieve. The two chapters of Part I follow different aspects of this journey from problems to possibilities. The first chapter focuses on problems of street-level behavior and theorizes about the possibility of street-level creativity. The second chapter focuses on the problems of the self-sufficiency paradigm, points to the potential resources for responding to those problems, and raises questions about what is feasible for frontline self-sufficiency practitioners to do about them. In these chapters, I argue that both the prevailing theories of street-level behavior and the theories underlying the self-sufficiency program designs mischaracterize the problems they seek to explain and overlook the potential for addressing them.

In Chapter 1, I examine three explanations for why frontline workers fail to live up to the expectations placed on them that I noted earlier. I explain each of these theories of behavior in terms of tensions between the desired behavior and what frontline workers are assumed to do instead. I refer to these tensions as "expectation mismatch explanations" to highlight the gap between the high expectations of the ideal and the low expectations of what is deemed probable.

My analysis of each of these mismatch explanations distinguishes between the constraints of limited authority, scarce program resources, and non-professional status that cannot be overcome and the challenges that might be surmounted. For each explanation, I identify additional materials the practitioners have to work with: their motivation to do their best and their commitment to service, their relationships with other system actors, their knowledge from practice, and the resources available in the implementation environment. This analysis surfaces questions about how frontline workers might use these materials more constructively to contribute to the work of governance.

I characterize the possibility of actualizing that potential in relation to the idea of creativity as opposed to innovation. And I explore the possibility of communities of practice as a vehicle for developing the capacity for creative street-level practice.
In Chapter 2, I analyze the policy designs that frame practitioners’ efforts to make programs work. The designs articulate policymakers’ expectations from actors in the system of governance. They identify the primary actors and direct their attention and intentions towards what is to be achieved, how the objectives are to be pursued and with what resources and which structures and systems for organizing action. Chronologically, the designs precede hiring decisions or role assignments and client recruitment that get the implementation process going. Yet, as the governance perspective emphasizes, the design process continues over the course of implementation as system actors accept the invitation to join in the work of governance.

Like the theories of street-level behavior I analyze in Chapter 1, ideas about policy designs and their implications for street-level participation in governance pertain to all social policies. Yet, how they matter depends on the specific characteristics of the designs and the relation between the designs and the reality of the social problem and the implementation environment. Thus, to understand the feasibility of creative street-level practice and to investigate how it works, I need to delve into the details of policy designs. Chapter 2 is the investigation of the policy terrain of this project. I position the Family Self-Sufficiency program and the Welfare-to-Work Voucher Program (JOBLink) in relation to broader self-sufficiency paradigm of policies and programs that promote economic independence from public assistance while attending to poor people’s immediate needs. I also explain why this policy context typifies the high expectations of the work of governance and what it implies for frontline self-sufficiency practitioners.

Three elements of the policy designs influence the problems and challenges of street-level practice and the prospects for creativity: the goals of the intervention, the technologies or treatments for pursuing the goals, and the management structures and systems that organize these efforts. In Chapter 2, I analyze the problems with self-sufficiency program designs in relation to each of these elements and point to the potential for creative responses to the challenges they pose to street-level practice.

The policy goals articulated in the authorizing legislation and as operationalized in the regulations delineate what street-level workers and the other system actors are expected to

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1 This conceptualization of the components of policy designs derives from Anne Larson Schneider and Helen Ingram’s (1997) analysis of policy design in relation to democratic principles and process, Janet Weiss’ (1999, 2000) depiction of the theories of the policy problem, desired outcome, and mode of intervention underlying policy designs, and the “logic of governance” framework for policy analysis spearheaded by Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill (2000).
achieve. Goals establish the fundamental intent of the intervention. They delineate what being accountable means by specifying for what policy actors are to be held to account. Implied in the policy goals are the policymakers' rationales for the desired outcomes for the target populations as they relate to theories of what causes the social problem the intervention aims to address (J. Weiss 1999, 2000, Schneider and Ingram 1997).

The fact that the self-sufficiency paradigm rests on the assumption that clients' (and the perverse incentives of previous social welfare programs) are the primary source of the problem of poverty means that -- by design -- the programs do not aim to address the structural causes of poverty. In Chapter 2, I argue that this narrow focus is a constraint that even the most creative street-level practitioners cannot overcome. The problems of goal conflict and ambiguity that are frequently associated with the paradigm (Meyers et al 2001, Riccucci 2005, Hasenfeld 2000) pose challenges for street-level practitioners who must discern whether their responses to particular dilemma of practice or general practice problems are appropriate. By examining the policy designs through the lens of the ideas of Chapter 1, I suggest that this ambiguity also leaves room for the practitioners to interpret the goals as they design and legitimate their creative alternatives.

Program technologies or treatments identify the implementing agents and stipulate how they are expected to elicit the behaviors assumed to lead to the desired outcomes. Regulations codify the underlying logic of action in light of the understanding of the problem the program aims to address and the goals of the intervention (J. Weiss 1999, 2000). The regulations delineate eligibility criteria and core processes for recruiting the clientele from the designated target populations and for administering the specified treatments. They also delineate the scope and intensity of those processes. Local agencies then further specify and interpret these regulations in relation to the implementation environment and the agency mission and priorities and formalize them in operating procedures, administrative manuals, and supervisory directives.

It is in applying the technologies as prescribed that frontline practitioners encounter the practice problems that trigger either the resort to coping or the possibility for creative practice. Assuming responsibility for improving programs entails changing these official modes of intervention or introducing novel ways of pursuing the goals. The specific procedures delineated

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2 This use of the term “technology” to describe modes of policy intervention or core work processes follows Hasenfeld (1992), Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill 2000, and Sandfort (2003).
in the designs -- as well as those of programs pursued by other system actors -- also supply key resources for using the strategies of creative practice (Sandfort 2003). The repertoire of rules and procedures accumulated throughout the system of governance and refined through the test of what works in practice comprise the materials for experimenting with novel combinations of intervention techniques and new divisions of labor and coordinated practices among system actors.3

Finally, program designs define the structures and management systems that support and organize the actors' utilization of the technologies in pursuit of the goals and support their efforts to make appropriate adjustments and valuable improvements.4 Designs specify the types of organizations in which the practitioners perform their work and how much discretion they have over their own practices and those of others. They also establish many of the mechanisms for communication and coordination with other service providers within and external to the designated agencies and with decision makers with the authority to amend policies. The budgetary allocations and contractual arrangements that influence what resources are available for making programs work are also a function of the designs, as are the systems for monitoring, evaluating, and rewarding performance and the commitment of resources for training and capacity development.

Each of these facets of management pose challenges for self-sufficiency work and for frontline practitioners' efforts to engage in the tasks of improving practice, legitimating their departures from established routines, and developing their capacity to do so. Yet the relatively wide discretion granted to frontline self-sufficiency practitioners is also what makes creative practice possible. Chapter 2 points to the potential for establishing new systems for communication, accessing additional resources, and creating opportunities for learning and sources support and encouragement. Indeed, the practitioner discussion forums are examples of organizing structures the practitioners use to amplify this potential and enhance their capacity to take advantage of it.

3 It is due to this possibility of using administrative procedures and treatment techniques as materials for creative practice that, like Jodi Sandfort (2003), I favor the term "technology" over alternatives. Whereas "treatment" emphasizes the interaction with the target population and "mode of intervention" focuses on the social problem to be addressed, "technology" refers to what is done and the mechanism for doing it. See Wanda Orlikowski's (1992) rethinking of the concept of technology.

4 This delineation is informed by Lynn et al's "logic of governance" model (2000) and Ingraham, Joyce and Donahue's (2003) discussion of management and management capacity in governance.
Extensive street-level discretion is one of the primary reasons self-sufficiency programs are an ideal terrain for exploring street-level practice and it seems to have sparked a resurgence of research on implementation (Meyers and Dillon 1999; Lennon and Corbett 2003, Riccucci 2005). The recent scholarship on welfare reform and welfare-to-work programs that informs my analysis of the program designs in Chapter 2 tends to reinforce the pessimism of prevailing theories of street-level behavior rather than recognize the potential for street-level contributions to the work of governance. Although some of these scholars recognize the possibility that frontline workers could participate more constructively, they have not observed street-level creativity in practice and are thus not able to illuminate what is feasible (Sandfort 1999, 2000, 2003; Cooney 2007). At the other end of the spectrum, another public housing-based self-sufficiency program, where frontline staff enjoy considerably more support from local management, exhibits the possibility for tapping the potential of program designs and the implementation environment to improve program operations. Yet the evaluation studies of this program do not tell us what street-level practitioners are able to do when such support is not forthcoming.

Therefore, the fact that FSS falls in between these two types of management systems makes it an opportune context for studying the feasibility of creative street-level practice. As I indicated in my introduction, JOBLink is closer to each of the other ends of the spectrum; practitioners have less discretion and more management support. My analysis of the program designs in Chapter 2, thus aims to identify the problems that warrant creative practice and the potential resources for engaging in it.

These two chapters of Part I develop an understanding of the problems of street-level behavior and self-sufficiency policy designs to ascertain the potential and possibilities for frontline participation in the work of governance. They raise key questions about the feasibility of creative street-level practice and pave the way for the exploration of how street-level creativity works in practice in the chapters of Part II.
CHAPTER 1
Realigning Expectations for Street-Level Behavior:
Explaining Failures and Exploring Feasible Contributions

In this chapter, I craft a theory of creative street-level practice from a critical examination of previous scholarship on street-level behavior interpreted in light of my fieldwork with the self-sufficiency practitioners described in the introduction. I pose this theory as a possible way out of the conundrum of increasing reliance on street-level workers to be responsive and responsible actors in the system of governance despite continuing doubts about their willingness and ability to meet even the less demanding expectations of traditional policies and management practices. I follow the practitioners' model of problem-focused collective inquiry: I reflect on the problems members of the community of scholars of street-level behavior have already identified through their cumulative discussions across disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and methodological approaches.

In the first part of the chapter, I examine three well-established explanations for the mismatch between what public serving workers are expected to do and their theorized response to those demands. For each of these “mismatch explanations,” I first identify the core argument as presented in the foundational scholarship and review recent empirical research that attenuates the abstract generalizations of the classical theories. I then raise questions about what these findings imply about the feasibility of street-level contributions to the work of discerning what is appropriate, improving program delivery, and developing their capacity to do so. I find answers or partial answers to some of these questions as I review and weave together the themes across the theoretical perspectives.

The critical review portrays a progression from pessimism to optimism that departs from the prevailing view that street-level workers will inevitably pursue the wrong goals to embrace the idea that they sometimes get the rules right or even do the right things in specific circumstances and it posits the possibility that they might make programs work better for the entire clientele. In the course of this conceptual journey, I also surface as yet unresolved questions. I point to theoretical and methodological limitations of previous research that get in the way of answering these questions. (Table 1.1 summarizes the primary points for each argument or “expectation mismatch” explanation. Figures 1.1-1.3 accompany the discussion.)
Table 1.1 Explaining the Expectations Mismatches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectation Mismatch Explanation</th>
<th>Between Motives</th>
<th>Between Designs &amp; Conditions</th>
<th>Between Street-Level Workers’ &amp; Manager’s Capacity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prevailing Theories About Street-Level Behavior</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>problem of misdirected effort</td>
<td>Won’t do it.</td>
<td>Can’t do it.</td>
<td>Can they do it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anticipated result of street-level discretion</td>
<td>shirking or sabotage</td>
<td>Coping</td>
<td>input into management-led problem solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desired response to discretion</td>
<td>obedience</td>
<td>situational adjustments</td>
<td>innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationship structure</td>
<td>antagonistic allegiance in dyads with clients and supervisors</td>
<td>disjointed networks of multiple system actors</td>
<td>responsive leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication style</td>
<td>contentious communication &amp; secrecy</td>
<td>disconnected communication</td>
<td>unexplored communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discerning Appropriateness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responsive to whom or to what?</td>
<td>to rules, clients, and personal beliefs</td>
<td>to clients, other system actors, environmental conditions</td>
<td>to measures of outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>basis for judgments</td>
<td>human judgment supports preferences to serve selected clients better</td>
<td>practical judgment facilitates discerning appropriate adjustments to particular situations</td>
<td>questions about capacity for deliberation to generate and legitimate innovative solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Improving Programs and Practice</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assumed responsibility</td>
<td>meeting individuals’ needs and desires</td>
<td>interpreting policy designs in relation to environment</td>
<td>producing results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scope of improvement</td>
<td>adjustments for individual clients</td>
<td>adjustments to particular situations</td>
<td>program or agency-wide improvements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Developing Capacity to Discern Appropriateness and Improve Programs and Practice</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>role of practitioner knowledge</td>
<td>knowing what the rules are; knowing who needs what</td>
<td>knowing about the environment; knowing how established routines work in practice</td>
<td>knowing how to create additional value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>capacity building through discourse</td>
<td>sensitive dialogue with select clients</td>
<td>consultation with and persuasion of diverse system actors</td>
<td>deliberation: critical reflection and reasoned argumentation; learning from and with others; transforming policies and identities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feasible Expectations?</td>
<td>Getting the Rules Right</td>
<td>Doing the Right Things</td>
<td>Making Programs Work Better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Further Questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>questions about the potential for street-level contributions</td>
<td>How can motivation be cultivated and sustained?</td>
<td>How can practitioners improve ongoing program operations?</td>
<td>How can practitioners apply strategies of collaboration, bricolage, and sensemaking to engage in creative street-level practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How can practitioners legitimate personal justice beliefs?</td>
<td>How can their knowledge from practice legitimate their interpretations of program goals and technologies?</td>
<td>How can participation in communities of practice develop practitioners’ capacity to learn and do more?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER 1
The first "explanation mismatch explanation" recalls the image of Bartleby the Scrivener who would "prefer not to" do what is expected from him; it casts the problem as one concerning the will or motivation to meet the expectations. The argument is that there is an inherent conflict between the interests of the public as conveyed in the policy designs and the interests of the street-level bureaucrats charged with implementing them. The theory focuses on individual workers’ attitudes to their work, their relationships within the bureaucratic hierarchy, and their personal beliefs about what is right. The discussion points to the possibility that some street-level workers are responsive to the needs of some their clients and raises questions about how that responsiveness might be applied more systematically, in the interests of the entire clientele. It also surfaces the question of how the motivation to improve service for clients might be cultivated and sustained.

The media portrayals of overloaded service workers characterize the second explanation for street-level failure. The mismatch between the policy designs and the conditions within the implementation environment make it impossible for even the most motivated workers to meet the expectations delineated in the regulations. The problem is that, in the face of their limited ability to overcome the obstacles in the environment, workers resort to coping mechanisms. The discussion of workers’ knowledge from practice derived from their engagement in the social service delivery system points to the possibility that they might take responsibility for addressing the obstacles in specific situations in addition to being responsive to specific clients’ idiosyncratic demands. It raises questions about whether it is feasible for workers with limited authority to pursue more comprehensive solutions to ongoing program operations.

In the third set mismatch explanation, I shift the inquiry to ask how ordinary frontline service workers—even those without the stamina and ingenuity of the solitary super-heroes of *Ikiru* and *Stand and Deliver*—might have more in common with goal-achieving system actors than previously assumed. I examine strategies those with greater authority than street-level workers have used to take advantage of potential resources in the implementation environment for problem solving and innovation. I then draw on the social psychologists’ concept of *creativity* as a subjectively assessed, value-adding departure from routine and propose it as a feasible alternative to the demands of outcome producing innovation.

To address the question of how relatively isolated and uncredentialed street-level practitioners might develop the capacity to engage in these strategies, I compare the practitioner
discussion forums to the venues established for public deliberation. I suggest the community of practice as an opportune organizing structure that allows workers to cross organizational boundaries to pursue the work of governance together. I argue that this perspective not only develops the capacity of street-level actors in the system of governance to improve ongoing practice and discern the value of their contributions; it also develops my capacity as a researcher to observe and analyze their efforts to do so.

I close the chapter by conceptualizing creative street-level practice as a possible alternative to the overly pessimistic assumption that frontline service workers will inevitably subvert program goals on the one hand and, on the other hand, the overly optimistic notion that they can engage in the same transformative innovations as entrepreneurial public executives. These challenges, questions, and ideas form the conceptual building blocks of that guide the analysis of my empirical research in the chapters of Part II.

1.1 The Mismatched Motives Explanation

This first explanation for street-level workers' disappointing behavior examines the interpersonal dynamics on the frontlines of public serving agencies. The central problem is the clash among the motives of system actors. The challenge of drawing them to contribute to the work of governance entails motivating them to direct their efforts towards appropriate goals. I begin with the prevailing theory that the inherent conflict of interests between workers and their supervisors inevitably lead to thwarted policy goals. I then examine recent surveys of workers' attitudes and preferences that point to the possibility that some workers pursue policy goals and even work hard to do so. I turn to a study of the stories workers tell about their experiences to highlight how their knowledge about program regulations and their clients allows them to make adjustments to improve service for selected clients and guides their judgment about whether these adjustments are appropriate. Along the way, I point to how my project builds on these conclusions and explores aspects of street-level motivation that remain poorly understood.

Figure 1.1 and its three trajectories accompany this discussion and the main points are summarized in the first column of Table 1.1.

**Prevailing Theories of Street-Level Motivation and the Problem of Self-Interest**

The assumption that frontline workers are motivated by their personal interests that are at odds with those of the policymakers, their supervisors, and all other actors with a stake in policy
Figure 1.1: Mismatched Motivations and the Feasibility of "Getting It Right" and "Doing the Right Thing"

- **Shirk or Sabotage**
  - self-interest
  - disregard procedures
  - Official Goals Thwarted

- **Work**
  - preferences
  - comply with procedures
  - Getting It Right
    - Official Goals Pursued

- **Serve**
  - commitment to clients & beliefs
  - exercise human judgment
  - Doing the Right Things?
    - Adjusted Goals Pursued for Selected Clients
implementation is a major theme in studies of bureaucratic behavior. In the terminology of the rational-choice perspective that has dominated the political science and economics discourse about bureaucratic behavior, leisure maximizing street-level bureaucrats – the agents – shirk their responsibilities or even sabotage the policy directives their supervisors – the principals – strive to enforce (Niskanen 1971, Alchian and Desetz 1972, Williamson 1975, 1983, Heclo 1977, Wood and Waterman 1994). The upper-most trajectory in Figure 1.1 illustrates this assumption that such self-interested behavior will inevitably lead to thwarted goals and unmet expectations.

Principal-agent theories predict that, like Bartleby the Scrivener, frontline workers will deviate from the expected behaviors because they see little value in pursuing the work as stipulated in their contracts or administrative manuals. Workers’ behavior on the job is understood to be a function of pay scales, the ease of work, and the option for leisure rather than promoting the program goals or satisfying the demands of their supervisors (Alchian and Desetz 1972, Niskanen 1971, Wood and Waterman 1994). Supervisors’ limited ability to curtail deviant uses of discretion has been attributed to the disconnect between rewards for working and job performance (Kohn 1993; Brehm and Gates 1997). Although merit pay and pay-for-performance systems are becoming increasingly popular strategies for countering this tendency, studies have not evidenced significant impact on actual performance in public sector contexts (Perry et al 2006; Ingraham 1993). Moreover, such systems of incentive pay rarely apply to frontline workers directly (Brehm and Gates 1997). Principal-agency theories thus predict that, in lieu of monetary rewards, workers will opt for the reward of leisure by doing less than what is required.

Further limiting supervisors’ ability to direct street-level behavior, the division of labor within bureaucratic agencies means that workers hold exclusive knowledge about the program procedures and routines they are charged with operating. This specialized knowledge allows them to conceal their actual behavior from surveillance monitors. Workers’ exclusive command over the procedures also means that other agency actors depend on them to perform their own tasks. Consequently, supervisors recognize that if they want to maintain operation, some work is better than even less.

Case studies of implementation failure in the sociological tradition of scholarship on bureaucratic behavior explicate this pessimism about street-level discretion as a function of
group dynamics embedded in organizational and societal contexts. Ethnographies illustrate how cohorts of workers adopt norms of behavior that compete with the directives transmitted along the chain of command (eg. Gouldner 1954; Kaufman 1960; Crozier 1967). Solidarity among frontline workers not only creates pressures to conform to group norms; it also creates a sense of identity and esprit de corps among those who occupy low status positions within the broader society as well within the organizational hierarchy (Crozier 1967; Van Maanen and Barley 1984). Some scholars observe that this power dynamic is replicated in service workers’ relationships with their clients. Workers’ control of information and administrative processes allows them to use their authority to dispense benefits to clients much in the same way that supervisors command obedience from workers (Prottas 1978, Lipsky 1980, Piven and Cloward 1993, Abromivitz 2005; Hasenfeld 1987; Soss 2002). Exerting that control is perceived as an assertion of their relatively higher social status, despite the fact that workers and their clients frequently share similar socio-economic characteristics. Consequently, suspicion of self-interested motives among shirking workers and rule-defying beneficiaries characterizes relationships rather than trust, respect, and commitments to shared objectives (Hasenfeld 1987; Soss 2002; Davis 2007).

Seen through this theoretical lens, the problem of unmet expectations is that frontline service workers are powerful actors in the system of governance who act against rather than with others; they are barriers to the work of governance rather than contributing partners. Street-level workers’ efforts reflect their inclination to respond antagonistically to those with different interests and to take responsibility for improving their own well-being instead of that of their clients. Frontline workers do not regret their inability to contribute to policy and agency objectives. In the language of economics, the indifference curves expressing their personal utility-maximizing functions are just that -- indifferent. In fact, the idea that workers benefit from the exclusivity of their knowledge from practice, implies that they are disinclined to contribute to supervisors’ and policymakers’ problem solving efforts. In short, frontline workers’ defiance may be rebellious, but their rebellion is not transformative. Their behavior ultimately reinforces systems in which they operate; they do not persuade their fellow system actors that their deviations from prescribed procedures promote mutual goals.
The challenge of addressing this problem of mismatched motives thus falls to supervisors whose primary recourse is to accept compromised accountability. Rather than improve or even optimize agency performance, they can only satisfice (Simon 1956).

Recent Empirical Research and the Motivation to Serve

"Principled Agents” and Their Preference for Serving Rather Than Shirking: The empirical research that informs more recent scholarship on bureaucratic behavior has challenged some of the assumptions underlying the mismatched motives explanation. One finding that is important for my project is that the image of Bartleby the Scrivener may be less common than these foundational theories of street-level behavior assume. Brehm and Gates’ (1997) extensive analysis of surveys of public service workers across a wide range of federal departments and county offices casts doubt on the idea that that self-interest – at least as typically defined – is the primary motive guiding all street-level behavior. They find considerable variation in street-level bureaucrats’ attitudes towards their jobs and their commitment to programmatic objectives and central tendencies indicate that workers are motivated by a wide range of values.

Most of the public service employees surveyed affirmed their value for higher pay and cash bonuses. However the majority said that they also value the sense of accomplishing something worthwhile, gaining the respect of their co-workers, and helping their clients. In some surveys, workers reported these factors as more significant rewards for good performance than paid time off and helping others was the single most common reason given for liking their jobs among social workers and police officers. The survey of frontline staff of human service agencies targeting low-income people noted in the introduction to Part I affirms that altruistic attitudes are more common than stereotypes suggest (Light 2003). Virtually all of the respondents indicated that helping people was an important consideration in taking the job and that they are proud to tell others what they do.

Respondents to these surveys not only say that they value public service; they also believe that they work hard to provide that service and almost as many think that their co-workers do so as well. In direct contrast to the theory of leisure maximization, 92% of those who responded to Light’s survey said they enjoy taking on challenging tasks and special assignments. Moreover, respondents to each of the surveys conveyed that their inclination to work hard is a function of their desire to please their clients and their colleagues as well as their desire for personal gains and recognition. Considerably more workers say they believe that clients have a great deal of
influence over how they allocate their time on the job than do those who say that supervisors, agency directors, and workers in other departments are the primary influences (Brehm and Gates 1997: 117).

These findings do not counter the classical theories' claim that managers have limited control over street-level discretion. Rather, what is new and promising is the suggestion that some workers' preferences include the desire to help their clients and that the intrinsic motivation of a job well done applies to street-level workers as well as executives. The arrows in Figure 1.1 convey this contrast in explanations for what motivates workers. The upper trajectory depicts standard principal-agency theory that objective interests, derived uniformly from the workers' positions in the hierarchy, divert workers' efforts from program goals. The middle trajectory, in contrast, shows that when workers' personal preferences are aligned with those of policymakers and supervisors, their efforts further program goals.

Brehm and Gates refer to those who prefer to work rather than shirk or sabotage as "principled agents." They are thus street-level versions of Anthony Downs' (1967) "zealots," "advocates" and "statesmen" who are loyal to policies, organizations, or the society as a whole or in Julian LeGrand's (1997, 2003) terminology, they are "knights" rather than self-serving "knaves" or merely subservient "pawns." This typology not only attenuates the universal claims about the problem of street-level workers; it is also the basis for Brehm and Gates' recommendation that managers respond to the challenge street-level poses to the work of governance by purposefully recruiting "principled agents."

This vision of a workforce of "principled agents" is certainly more hopeful than the previous characterization of a rank and file of Bartleby-like resisters. However, this static view of motivation as a personality trait rather than a moving image of behavior poses two challenges to understanding what is feasible for street-level workers to contribute to the work of governance. One problem is that the focus on stable preferences does not help us to understand how more frontline workers might be encouraged to "get the rules right" more of the time, let alone how they might do more than simply comply with the regulations. This limited theory of motivation is not limited to street-level workers. In fact, motivating workers along the hierarchy of public serving bureaucracies is considered one of the most critical unsolved problems in public management (Koch 1986; Behn 1995; Perry 2000, 2006; Wright 2001, 2004, Wright and Davis 2003). How frontline practitioners cultivate and sustain their own motivation and that of others...
in the system of governance is among the central questions I address in the chapters that follow. This discussion of preferences guides this inquiry by calling attention to what they value aside from the difficult to modify monetary compensation: their desire to help their clients, to forge and nurture friendships among colleagues, and to gain a sense of meaningful accomplishment.

The second limitation to the focus on personality traits is that they tell us little about how "principled agents" -- those who are already motivated -- act on their principles to take up the challenges of the work of governance. Here, recent empirical research on street-level behavior offers more guidance for my project. In the remainder of this section, I examine what scholarship about how individual workers' motivation influences what they actually do on the job implies about the capacity for greater street-level contributions.

Brehm and Gates' statistical analysis of the correlations between workers' preferences and attitudes about work and their self-reported behavior sheds somewhat more light on the behavioral dynamic than the generalizations of previous principal-agency models. They conclude that the workers' expressed personal priorities and their sense of their peers' expectations help to explain the extent to which they perform their jobs as directed, at least according to their self-reported accounts. For example, they find that social welfare case-workers are more likely to report that they bring paper work home -- a measure of working -- if they have expressed that doing their job well makes them feel good about themselves as a person. Workers who say that working hard gains them respect and friendship from coworkers are also significantly less likely to indicate that they "fudge paperwork" -- a measure for shirking -- or sabotage program goals as measured by the reported tendency to "bend the rules."

Yet this approach to analyzing how street-level workers direct their efforts and how hard they work is limited in several respects. The small number of respondents who reported behaviors the authors associate with shirking and sabotage casts doubt on both the reliability of their data and the validity of their analysis. The computed effects are also small. In fact, despite the substantial proportions of respondents who indicated that serving clients is a priority, this factor did not account for an appreciable amount of the variation in any of the reported behavior types. The small effects may result from the interactions among the types of preferences, a dynamic the authors do not consider; preferences to help clients may conflict with allegiance to peers, fear of supervisors' reprimands, and general distain for paperwork. Moreover, how
workers' act on their principles may also depend on the particular circumstances and the specific relationships that comprise bureaucratic work in practice.

"Principled agents" may well be motivated to be responsive to expectations of their clients, supervisors, and other system actors and to take responsibility for doing good work. Yet we need more substantial evidence about how this commitment to service actually influences what they do in practice. Moreover, to understand how they might contribute to the work of governance, we need to know more about how they respond when expectations conflict; this is the work of discerning what is appropriate. To understand how they might take responsibility for the work of improving service delivery, we need to know how they strive to do more for their clients than simply comply with the official regulations. These are questions my research seeks to illuminate.

**Human Judgment and Reconciling Dual Roles of Client-Agents and State-Agents:** We find answers to some of these questions in the stories Steven Maynard-Moody and Michael Musheno (2000, 2003) elicit from police officers, teachers, and vocational counselors. The stories provide a thicker description of what street-level workers actually do on the job than do surveys of workers' attitudes and self-reports about what they tend to do on the job. The narratives are accounts of how the workers behave when their desire to help their clients conflicts with the directives they receive from their supervisors or the rule books. In Maynard-Moody and Musheno's adaptation of the rational choice terminology, frontline service workers are "citizen-agents" as well as "state-agents" and they are accountable to both of these system actors simultaneously. Yet the simultaneity of the dual dyads of accountability does not mean that street-level workers grant equal credence to each role. To the contrary, the stories substantiate the survey evidence that citizen-principals' expectations have greater influence on the street-level behavior than do the expectations of state-principals.

The stories also surface greater potential for street-level contributions to the system of governance than the discussion of street-level motives up to this point in the discussion. Whereas the survey data suggests that motivation is a function of workers' preference or utility, the stories convey their sense of obligation to their clients and their conviction to be of use. Across the three service domains Maynard-Moody and Musheno studied, workers' stories recount their efforts to do more for their clients than the minimal requirements stipulate. The citizen-agent account thus suggests that workers' commitment to their clients generates both
aspects of motivation – the level of their effort in addition to the direction to which it is applied. In terms of the principles of the system of governance, street-level workers not only strive to be responsive to their clients’ expectations; they also aim to take responsibility for fulfilling them, at least to some extent.

In the bottom trajectory of Figure 1.1, I have represented these client-oriented efforts as serving rather than simply working. I indicate that the workers’ adjustments to official guidelines sometimes lead to better service for selected clients and that such exercise of discretion evidences street-level versions of the work of improvement program delivery, albeit on the small scale, client-by-client basis. The figure also illustrates the work of discerning appropriate uses of discretion. In contrast with the more automatic, or even instinctive, response of disregarding or complying with programmatic directives, workers judge whether the augmented service an individual client receives constitutes “doing the right thing” even if it conflicts with “getting the rules right.”

Before I pick up on the question of whether it is feasible for street-level workers to make more substantial improvements to program delivery, I want to examine what this modified characterization of the alignment of motives implies about street-level workers’ ability to use discretion appropriately and the challenges they face in doing so. Maynard-Moody and Musheno substantiate what others have claimed about the basis for this type of street-level judgment as justification for more extensive discretion in frontline human service work. Workers rationalize their deviation from prescribed behavior with reference to what they know from their personal relationships with their clients, their morally-based appreciation of human nature, and their personal beliefs about what is just and fair (Kelly 1994; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 2003, Hasenfeld 2000). This human and moral rather than legalistic and rule-based basis for judgment (Handler 1992; Hammond 1996) has both advantages and disadvantages for street-level participation in the work of discerning the appropriateness of their adjustments to standard procedures.

One advantage is that human judgment entails a more cooperative relationship between the client and worker than the aforementioned competitive or even antagonistic relationships between principals and agents. Instead of concealing information from clients as a means to exert power over them, workers elicit information from them. Combined with their exclusive knowledge of program rules and organizational routines, this relational knowledge allows the
work to tailor services to each client’s specific needs. The stories workers recount about their efforts to meet clients’ expectations suggest that they often make these client-serving judgments under their supervisor’s radar. This exploitation of information asymmetries is motivated by the same inclination to avoid repudiation for failing to comply with directives observed in classical principal-agent antagonism. In contrast to self-serving purposes of self-interested agents, however, citizen-agents also conceal their behavior and circumvent formal appeals processes with the intention of increasing the chances that clients will get what they need when they need it. An ethics of individualized pragmatism guides their judgment about how to exercise discretion.

These client-worker interactions often involve more than a simple exchange of information. They may also involve an emotional exchange and the resulting trust and rapport may allow for collaborative adjustments that are even more responsive to clients’ actual needs. Interactions can also be emphatic and compassionate or even empowering (Hasenfeld 1987; Sansone 1998, Noddings 2002). In such cases, both clients and workers may be motivated to take on more responsibility for making sure programs work.

While such interpersonal relationships motivate workers to do their best, the effort can also be too specific and too personal. Workers may overstep the boundaries of their roles as citizen-agents to project their own desires on those of the client (Soss 2002). Alternatively, their commitment to the clients with whom they have formed bonds may lead them to neglect the needs of those where trust and rapport have yet to develop. Scarce resources, time, and energy and personality incompatibilities mean that only a small number of clients have the privilege of special treatment.

As much as human judgment is a product of personal and specific connections, it is also grounded in abstract and generalized social constructions. Street-level workers assess who they believe to be worthy of special treatment based on socially acceptable norms and values. Some of these norms and values are universal; others derive from workers’ membership in racial, class, gender, and sexual groupings or their assumptions about clients who are members of such groups. Maynard-Moody and Musheno suggest that recognizing shared membership in such groups affords workers better understanding of their clients so that they can be more responsive even when needs are not explicitly expressed. They also observe that bonds of identity can motivate workers to exert additional effort to fulfill clients’ expectations.
However, the application of these generalizations to specific clients is prone to inconsistencies, biases, and prejudice as well as empathy and compassion (Soss 2002; Davis 2007; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 2003). Even when workers strive to avoid stereotyping, relational knowledge and personal judgments are inherently idiosyncratic. Similar stereotyping also applies to the service workers themselves. As Debra Meyerson (1998) argues, expectations of the women who tend to fill these roles assume that they are naturally inclined to respond compassionately, and thus need no other incentives or supports to manage the strains of doing so effectively. Parallel arguments also apply to nonprofit organizations (Buelens and Van den Broeck 2007).

Human judgment thus pertains to one client at a time rather than the entire clientele and to specific workers at specific times. Consequently, efforts to be responsive lack systemic coherence. Indeed, Maynard-Moody and Musheno’s narratives convey workers in opposition to “the system” of policies, regulations, and administrative procedures rather than as contributors to the system of governance. Nor does this personalized perspective afford service workers an alternative system of discerning what is appropriate that applies their relational knowledge to judgments that are consistent or reasoned instead of idiosyncratic or judgmental. Maynard-Moody and Musheno emphasize that street-level judgment employs an individually oriented ethics of pragmatism where the principles of responsiveness and responsibility conflict with one another:

Street-level workers’ pragmatism and experience undergirds their moral reasoning and justifies (or to the critic, rationalizes) their assertions of power and authority relative to both their hierarchical superiors and their citizen-clients. Street-level workers clearly “take” responsibility to act based on their own judgments, but taking responsibility is not enough to make them responsible actors. (2003: 156)

Maynard-Moody and Musheno’s analysis of street-level narratives illustrates that the tensions between the roles of citizen-agent and state-agent are a constant part of street-level life. Indeed, the authors suggest that reconciling the dilemmas and tensions of street-level life may be unreconcilable. However, a close reading of the stories also suggests that workers are not entirely reconciled to this impasse. The frustrations they express about their failure to find a balance among the expectations of the state, their clients, and their own beliefs indicate that they would rather contribute to than detract from the work of governance. The problem the stories
reveal is that the knowledge and inspiration gleaned from one-on-one interpersonal relationships is not enough to resolve those tensions.

Camaraderie among coworkers within the agency is another source of guidance. Maynard-Moody and Musheno’s stories illustrate how street-level colleagues support one another in reducing friction between their personal concerns and their roles as public servants. Such mutual support for fellow members of the occupational community may help prevent burnout and turnover. It is certainly more conducive to service operations than the solidarity directed towards defiance of policy goals and organizational mission discussed above. The accounts of mutual aid also suggest that frontline workers can work together to identify and address problems. However, those stories do not teach us how coworkers might support one another in balancing obligations to the state with obligations to the client. We do not see how the capacity for productive deliberation together might extend beyond the collegial domain to the domain of practice. These are questions my study of the practitioner discussion forums aims to address.

As Maynard-Moody and Musheno argue, the stories not only convey an account of the characters; they also situate the dilemmas in a particular context. This context is a potential source of knowledge in addition to that gleaned from the rules and from other people. Because their interest is in elucidating how street-level workers’ beliefs and identities shape their behavior, however, the authors do not explore how this context might inform decision-making and performance. The question of how the policy context and its relation to the implementation environment influence the feasibility of street-level contributions to governance is the focus of the expectation mismatch discussed in the next section.

I also want to call attention to the stories themselves as an untapped resource for feasible street-level contributions. As I argued in my discussion of the work of governance in the introduction to the dissertation, studies of public deliberation in other contexts suggest that collective interpretation of experiential knowledge enhances critical reasoning about meanings, motives, and actions essential for responsible action. Maynard-Moody and Musheno recognize such potential in the stories they collected. However, they conclude that the stories provide a “self-portrait of street-level moral reasoning on which street-level workers rarely gaze” (p. 160). To extract the knowledge that stories synthesize so that it can be applied to decision making and action, they need to be heard and examined as well as told. I pick up on the authors’ appeal to take stories more seriously by looking at the venues where reflection on practice is given a time
and a place. As I argue in the chapters of Part 2, the practitioner discussion forums offer such opportunities for deliberating about difficult decisions and potential solutions to the contradictions between state-agent and citizen-agent roles.

1.2 The Mismatch Between Policy Designs and the Implementation Environment

An alternative explanation for disparity between what programs demand from street-level service workers and what they are expected to accomplish in practice points to the impossibly high demands of program designs given the actual conditions of the implementation environment. Rather than see the practitioners as the core of the problem of unmet expectations, I now look at the inadequacies throughout the system of governance: the policies the system generates, the organizations that implement them, and the relationships of the policies and implementing organizations to the environment in which they operate.

According Michael Lipsky’s (1980) now classic elaboration of this theory, even when street-level bureaucrats are highly motivated to serve their clients and fulfill their obligations, the strains of their working conditions make accomplishing that goal exceedingly challenging. This image of the overburdened worker resonates with the media’s accounts of beleaguered child protection workers and the results of the Annie E. Casey survey presented above. High caseloads, inadequate training, insufficient program resources, and under-developed or ambiguous service technologies impede service workers’ ability to comply with the program regulations. As Lipsky states, “Street-level bureaucrats attempt to do a good job in some way. The job, however, is in a sense impossible to do in ideal terms. How is the job to be accomplished with inadequate resources, few controls, indeterminate objectives, and discouraging circumstances?” (p. 82).

This focus on the nature of the practitioners’ responsibilities – the work they are to take on in contrast to their attitudes about the work allows for a more expansive view of street-level responsiveness that includes the environment and additional system actors. I discuss recent empirical research that suggests street-level workers’ knowledge from practice affords greater legitimacy to their decision-making process than the accounts reviewed in the previous mismatch explanation. I close the section by pointing to how my project expands on this recent research both conceptually and methodologically. (Figure 1.2 and the second column of Table 1.1 accompany this discussion.)
Prevailing Theories on Coping with Practice Problems

*Coping With Impossible Expectations:* According to Lipsky’s understanding of bureaucratic behavior, street-level workers modify policy directives so as to focus their efforts on what is feasible to do within the constraints of the policy designs and implementation environment. Like the shirking behavior described in the previous section, this use of discretion deviates from policy objectives. The difference is that the tendency to do less than what is expected is viewed as an adaptation to environmental constraints rather than the pursuit of self-interest or personal preferences.

Lipsky identifies several types of adaptive behaviors - or in his terminology, “coping mechanisms.” Workers resort to *rationing* services they provide to clients as a means to conserve scarce program resources. They give preference to some clients over others because program budgets are insufficient to cover the actual needs and because high case loads limit how much time they are able to allocate to interactions with clients. Pressure to meet performance standards exacerbates the tendency to “cream” those clients who are more likely to succeed so that outcome measures meet required targets (Brodkin 1986, 1997, Soss 2002). This coping mechanism is thus the flip side of the citizen-agent’s effort to “do the right thing;” quotas and limited resources exacerbate the inclination to improve services for only those clients who are considered easier to work with or more deserving of assistance.

Reducing complex tasks to more easily routinized procedures is another mechanism to conserve scarce resources. The tendency to focus on paperwork or other simple operations rather than more intensive interactions with clients is one common example of *routinization* that has been observed in studies of the welfare reform implementation discussed in the next chapter (Meyers et. al 1998; Sandfort 2000, 2003). Other examples include cursory versions of complex inspections routines (May and Wood 2003; Fineman 1998) or simply going through the motions of new procurement procedures (Kelman 2005).

These two types of coping mechanisms - *rationing* and *routinization* - call attention to the difficulty of the tasks street-level workers are expected to accomplish as opposed to their inclination to minimize effort in favor of leisure as the principal-agency theories assume. As more robust theories of motivation recognize, difficult tasks are not in themselves barriers to performance; feasible challenges are actually motivating devices. However, when workers lack adequate resources and the requisite skills to pursue the challenges or the opportunity to develop
the capacity to do so, challenges become de-motivating constraints (Kanfer 1990; Bandura 1982; Perry 2006, Wright 2001, 2004). This insight implies that the antagonistic behaviors identified in the previous discussion may be products of the frustration of impossible expectations rather than fixed character traits, structurally defined interests, or misguided preferences. The tendency to blame clients for low program achievement performance or to exert power over clients are thus additional types of coping mechanisms that allow workers to feel better about their own lack of self-efficacy.

This effort to cope with the inability to meet the multiple expectations of service work prompts one more coping mechanism: rationalizing the resort to the other coping mechanisms. Lipsky stresses that the coping mechanisms allow the workers to survive the pressures of the job with their values of helping clients and their norms of good service provision intact. They are an antidote to burnout and turnover, at least in the short run. Like the “satisficing” behaviors of managers referenced above, coping is what makes street-level service work sustainable. As adjustments to impossible to meet demands, coping mechanisms potentially afford workers time and energy to devote to circumventing the obstacles of resource scarcity and inadequate program designs to “do the right thing” for selected clients. Indeed, the stories Maynard-Moody and Musheno elicit from teachers, police officers, and vocational counselors illustrate how important it is to bridge the dissonance between program demands and clients’ expectations without compromising their sense of themselves as hard workers who are committed to the ideals of public service.

Compromise may be better than persistently and intentionally thwarted goals in that it means street-level workers are engaged with the system of governance rather than against it, albeit in a relatively passive and undesirable manner. Seeing the deviations from expected behavior as adaptive mechanisms also emphasizes that the workers are responsive to the conditions in the implementation environment as well as to the state and their clients. Yet as the upper trajectory of Figure 1.2 suggests, coping also compromises goal achievement. It involves relinquishing instead of assuming responsibility for the work of governance. To understand what is feasible for street-level workers to contribute, we need to take a closer look at what is getting in their way.

**The Terrain of Implementation Obstacles and Ubiquity of Coping:** Whereas the discussion thus far has examined the exercise of discretion at the frontlines of public serving agencies, Figure 1.2 situates street-level behavior in relation to the entire service delivery system
Figure 1.2 Mismatched Fit Between Policy Design and Implementation Conditions

Organizational Context

Program/Policy Design → Practice Problems

Coping Mechanisms

Goals Compromised

Occasionally relinquish responsibility

Goals Pursued

Doing the Right Thing

in specific situations

Social Services Delivery System

Occasionally assume responsibility

Practical judgment

Legitimated adjustments for specific clients and situations

Occasionally relinquish responsibility

Personal judgment

React

Interpret

Attentive Responses

CHAPTER 1

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and the broader economic, social, and policy environment as well as the organizational context. The three spheres in the figure portray the system of governance perspective on the dynamic interactions among multiple actors and between actors and the implementation environment. In each sphere, obstacles likely to induce coping derive from insufficient resources and program technologies that do not operate as theorized or require competencies that actors responsible for performing them have not developed. Interdependent relationships among actors within and across the spheres exacerbate these challenges, especially when actors compete over scarce resources or when goals, strategies, and priorities are considered incompatible. Even where potential partners across departments and agencies recognize mutual objectives, inadequate structures for communication and coordination can hamper rather than facilitate joint action or efforts to ensure accountability to one another. Negative perceptions of partners’ inadequate competency and dependability preclude the trust necessary for cooperation. Moreover, changes in the economic, budgetary, and policy climate may exacerbate each of these problems or introduce new ones.

Although much of the research that has identified the impact of these obstacles on policy implementation has not focused on street-level actors, there is reason to expect that such obstacles frequently lead to the coping mechanisms described above. Recent research that aims to specify Lipsky’s generalized claims about street-level behavior affirms that coping is ubiquitous across policy domains as diverse as welfare, employment and training, immigration absorption, building inspections, and environmental regulation (Meyers et al 1998; Winter 2001, Winter and May 2001; May 2003; Fineman 1998). Observations of street-level coping also cross international boundaries (Winter 2001, Fineman 1998). As Evelyn Brodkin’s research on welfare reform indicates, this goal-detracting use of discretion has also persisted across administrative and policy reforms, whether they emphasize more rigid controls on street-level

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behavior or broaden the scope of frontline decision-making to accommodate local conditions and client circumstances (Brodkin 1986; 1997; 2003).

Indeed, policies and management styles inspired by the system of governance perspective may well exacerbate the conditions that prompt the resort to each of the coping mechanisms described above. Logically, the combination of broader street-level discretion, local agency flexibility, and the division of responsibility across multiple actors in the service delivery system results in programs with more ambiguous goals, technologies that are more complex, and interest-spanning organizing structures that invite conflict as well as attempt to manage it. This ambiguity, complexity, and conflict are more likely lead to routinization (Meyers et al 1998; 2001; Fineman 1998; Wright 2004). The reliance on innovation over allocation of additional resources is as likely to result in rationing services as it is in greater system efficiency. The recognition of diverse system actors as partners in governance also facilitates the tendency to blame others for unmet program expectations and where the ensuing frustrations trigger defensiveness, actors are more likely to turn to hierarchical power than the power of working together.

**Practice Problems in a Responsive System of Governance:** As much as coping is ubiquitous, it is not inevitable. Where there are no obstacles to carrying out policy directives, workers are able to “get the rules right.” (In the interests of explicating responses to implementation challenges, I have omitted the possibly more typical scenario of compliance with the regulations from Figure 1.2.) But there is also an alternative, more optimistic scenario in which the workers overcome the obstacles to pursue program goals. In the lower trajectory of Figure 1.2, I suggest that both scenarios are responses to “practice problems.” Martin Rein (1983) uses this term to describe the “normal crises of everyday practice” that emerge when frontline human service workers encounter mismatches between what the programs require and what they can actually deliver.

Both words of the phrase, *practice problem*, are significant to understanding how street-level workers might overcome rather than succumb to implementation challenges. First, these obstacles are not ad hoc or idiosyncratic functions of the misalignment among workers’ personal interests, preferences, or beliefs and those of their supervisors and clients. As problems of ongoing *practice*, the problems evidence systemic disparities between design prescriptions and feasible operations. Recognition of these disparities allows policy analysts, policymakers, and
managers to determine what constitutes a fair test for the program designs and to avoid deflecting unwarranted blame on street-level implementers (Lin 2000). Avoiding unwarranted blame is a step towards more realistic expectations; it lowers the bar from impossible towards the feasible. This delineation of what is feasible for street-level workers to accomplish is thus an additional dimension of the logic of appropriateness. For system actors to be accountable to the public and to one another, expectations need to be appropriate in light of the adequacy of the policy interventions and management structures, the availability of resources, and the existing capacities of all involved.

While the conception of street-level bureaucrats as victims of poor policy designs and management practices is more sympathetic than the images of self-serving behavior or personal incompetence discussed thus far, recognition of the limitations does not tell us how street-level workers might take a more active part in overcoming the obstacles. In contrast, the second part of the phrase practice problems suggests the possibility that the challenges of making programs work are not inevitably insurmountable; they are problems rather than constraints.

Indeed, Lipsky’s idea that street-level bureaucrats could serve as potential mediators between policymakers’ vision and the actual experience of carrying out the directives was key to the reconception of implementation as the continuation rather than the culmination of the policymaking process. However, Lipsky did not explicate the workers’ role in resolving the discrepancies. In fact, his account of bottom-up implementation describes policy as it is, not policy as it should be. As I explicated in the introduction to the dissertation, subsequent research has suggested that street-level workers’ hands on experience with the practice problems is a vital resource for both policy reform and manager-initiated innovation. However, scholars of bureaucratic behavior have only just begun to examine the unique contributions of street-level workers as focal actors in the process of improving program operations. Before I turn to a critical examination of this recent scholarship and the theoretical and methodological basis for my extension of its conclusions, I want to examine the skepticism about frontline workers’ capacity for independent problem solving.

In his explication of practice problems, Rein (1983) contends that the “minor professionals” who comprise much of the frontline human service workforce lack the cognitive skills to engage in problem solving. Their experience operating the programs yields considerable knowledge about what works and cannot work, yet it is the “hot knowledge” of emotions that is not as
conducive to problem analysis as the "cool knowledge" of reason that credentialed professionals and skilled researchers bring to the analysis of problems. Nor are frontline workers able to translate their felt experience into the formal, prepositional, and abstract or codified language that is intelligible to those with the decision making authority to reform policy or develop better management practices. Without analytical skills or the guidance of those who have such skills, the workers are left with "practice worries" that register as "oppositions, resistances, feelings of awe, or moments of malaise" rather than practice problems that could be addressed through analysis and learning.

Rein warns that the emotional costs of this failure to satisfy their desire to serve their clients and find meaning and mission in their work results in crises of spirit and identity that intensify low morale, alienation, and burnout. The coping mechanisms of routinization, rationing, blame deflection, and exercising coercive power thus help them survive in the short term; they do not allow workers to manage the deeper challenges of salvaging service values. To extend this observation in light of the critique of the motives-mismatch, merely worrying about the mismatch of design and reality is in tension with the very source of intrinsic motivation that compels workers to try their best. For workers who value achieving policy objectives, coping is an invitation for self-criticism as well as criticism from supervisors and program evaluators and negative portrayals of workers' efforts in the media or other public forums.

Moreover, Rein warns that the blocked flow of street-level knowledge has consequences for the entire system of governance. He contends that without knowledge building networks for producing rationally tested policy reforms, those with more decision-making power attempt to address the practice problems with solutions that are inherently inadequate. Like a myth that explicates the untenable, they nevertheless reassure:

A 'glove' is refashioned to fit the hand of practice. Although it is never perfect, it provides for a revival of group solidarity, for community and a sense of shared purpose, and it reinvigorates the individual practitioner. In the enthusiasm of recommitment to the system, the private and public solutions of practice worries merge. A crusade develops."

This vision implies that efforts to improve policy and its delivery are a "crusade" rather than a cure. They evoke fixes that merely reconstitute the resources and repertoire of devices already available to the system. Appeals for coordination of services, better training, and even massive
new funding are essentially a “bureaucratic tautology” or the “superimplementation of the normal” presented in with “spirit of salvation.”

In contrast, the system of governance perspective argues for a less pessimistic, albeit incrementalist, alternative to the dichotomy between an entirely new welfare state (however desirable) and merely symbolic reforms. As I noted in the introduction to Part I, while it may well be a “crusade,” the perspective has generated new structures for knowledge building, some of which incorporate the “hot knowledge” derived from experiences on the frontlines. The results of these efforts are clearly not sufficient to eradicate practice problems let alone to resolve the social problems they ultimately seek to address. The question is whether more subtle “restitution” can precipitate “recommitment” to improving programs and their operations rather than appeasing worries.

My objective in this project is to elucidate how it is feasible for street-level workers to apply this knowledge from practice towards incremental improvements when policymakers and managers have invited them to participate in reform efforts. In the next section, I examine recent exploration of what street-level practitioners can do with their knowledge from practice in connection with other system actors that is the take-off point for my own project.

**Recent Empirical Research and the Prospects for Street-Level Contributions**

*Using Practical Judgment to Address Particular Manifestations of Practice Problems:*

The lower trajectory of Figure 1.2 is loosely based on Janet Vinzant and Lane Crothers’ (1998) conception of accountable street-level discretion. I detail and elaborate on their ideas about more constructive and responsible street-level behavior because – together with the insights discussed above -- it presents a point of departure for my own project. The authors’ ethnography of child welfare workers and beat police officers leads them to counter the pessimistic contentions that the resort to coping mechanisms is the only way frontline human service workers can contend with the frequent mismatches between programmatic directives and the complex reality of the implementation environment. In contrast, Vinzant and Crothers argue that frontline workers sometimes act as “street-level leaders” who decide how to resolve dilemma of practice that emerge when the existing regulations fail to provide sufficient guidance about how to achieve program goals or about which goals should receive priority. In the terminology introduced in the previous section, street-level leaders modify official procedures to
"do the right thing." Yet unlike the accounts of the previous discussion, they seek legitimation for their decisions. When workers act as street-level leaders, their responses to the dilemma may well entail compromise, but they strive not to compromise the goals themselves. Instead of relinquishing their responsibility through the resort to coping mechanisms, they occasionally assume responsibility for contending with the difficulties of the situation.

The chief difference between the legitimated adjustments I mark as "attentive responses" in Figure 1.2 and those that could be considered coping mechanisms relates to the workers' engagement in the three spheres of the implementation environment. My reading of the vignettes the authors use to recount the workers' decision making process suggests that their judgments are based on practical knowledge as well as the relational and emotional knowledge highlighted above. To identify the key elements this process of discerning appropriate adjustments of standard procedures, I use Hendrik Wagenaar's (2004) characterization of practical judgment as

the everyday, taken-for-granted routines and practices, the explicit and tacit knowledge that is brought to bear on concrete situations, the moving about in the legal-moral environment of large administrative bureaucracies, the mastering of difficult human-emotional situations, the negotiation of discretionary space, and the interactive give and take with colleagues that, taken together, make up everyday public administration (Wagenaar 2004: 644).

Whereas the principled agents and citizen agents described in the previous section respond to the demands expressed by their clients and colleagues, street-level leaders consider the options available to them based on their assessment of the concrete situation. The ethnographers show how the police officers and child welfare workers combine their explicit knowledge of official procedures and their observations of the circumstances with their tacit knowledge from their experience of what has worked in the past to identify the key concerns and decide how to resolve the dilemma they evoke.

The vignettes also convey how the workers seek out the opinions of diverse system actors as they assess the situation and formulate their response. In contrast to the secrecy or contentious discourse of the dyadic relations that characterize principal-agent models or the disconnected communication that induces coping, street-level leaders engage in constructive discourse with a diverse set of system actors. Vinzant and Crothers' accounts show that the workers frequently consult with their colleagues in other service providing agencies as well as their own and they
sometimes also take into account the views of client advocates, the courts, and the media. In some cases, members of the general public who have witnessed the event in question further broaden the number of alternative interpretations on which the practitioners base their judgments. These exchanges with other actors in the system of governance ground the workers' assessment of what is appropriate in the norms and values of the legal-moral environment that—by virtue of their relation to a specific set of circumstances—are both less abstract and potentially less idiosyncratic than the internalized societal norms of personal justice beliefs.

When the demands and perspectives of these various actors conflict, Vinzant and Crothers observe that workers sometimes make a concerted effort to persuade clients and partners to adopt their judgments about the appropriate course of action. Although they also witnessed situations in which workers reacted without such considered response or where their conclusions were questionable, the authors certainly evidence the capacity of frontline workers to negotiate discretionary space by interacting with colleagues. In this sense, their exchanges with colleagues and stakeholders involve more critical reflection and reasoned argumentation than the sensitive conversations of client-agent relationships, even if the informal interactions do not constitute the knowledge building networks Rein deems necessary for genuine improvements to practice.

The vignettes from the field thus suggest that street-level workers' knowledge from practice, understanding of the situation, and interactions with others allow them to master difficult human-emotional situations. What they know is not too "hot" to apply to reasonable judgments. Rather, street-level leaders' decision making relies on several extensive sources of knowledge. They know about the situation in addition to the rules; they know who their partners in the system of governance are in addition to their clients and supervisors; they know how established routines work in practice and they know how to integrate different sources of knowledge to apply to interpreting, devising, and validating appropriate responses. With this knowledge base, practitioners need not only identify with their clients to do what they feel is right; they can identify the specific dilemma of practice and interpret which responses are legitimate. When they act as street-level leaders, frontline workers make appropriate adjustments to standardized procedures rather than succumb to the paralysis of worrying or resort to the passive default of coping mechanisms.
This engagement with other actors in the system of governance suggests that frontline workers can assume responsibility for their responses to the dilemma of practice - at least some of the time and with respect to specific situations. To return to Rein’s imagery, such street-level leadership may not utterly escape “bureaucratic tautology” of existing policy paradigms. Yet in their conscientious consideration of dilemma of practice, frontline service workers sometimes pull their hands free from the glove of currently accepted doctrine and routines to pursue the work of the moment. As the Vinzant and Crothers stress:

If the exercise of discretion by frontline bureaucrats is understood as leadership, workers are not ‘problems’ who distort the application of policies through their abuse of discretion. Nor are they autonomous actors whose actions should not be questioned. Rather, they are active, accountable, and responsible participants in governance who play different roles under different circumstances (pp. 150-1).

It is important to note that this idea of street-level leadership implies distinctive and exemplary rather than ordinary, commonplace behavior. Not all street-level workers are leaders; nor do they exercise leadership in every situation. Yet street-level leadership is not an all-or-nothing enterprise. Vinzant and Crothers suggest that there is a continuum of effectiveness and ineffectiveness that depends on how workers navigate competing expectations, fluid circumstances, and conflicting rules and norms. Furthermore, by naming the phenomenon of street-level leadership, the authors suggest that these examples of accountable discretion are not idiosyncratic anomalies; they are explainable and justifiable practices.

The authors conclude with the conjecture that acknowledging the potential for leadership is one means to make it more prevalent. They suggest that public administrators can promote leadership among their staff by rethinking roles and responsibilities, considering multiple factors, values and pressures in evaluating what their staff does, and building better community and media relations to facilitate better judgments about how to exercise discretion. They also suggest that awareness of the possibility of street-level leadership might encourage policymakers and the public to set higher expectations for public service workers. And they speculate that exercising leadership can empower street-level workers to do so more frequently by highlighting the importance of what they do and enhancing their sense of competence.

The Conceptual and Methodological Limits of the Street-level Leadership Model:

Although Vinzant and Crothers’ ethnographic study of beat police officers and child care workers effectively counters the argument that street-level workers lack the cognitive capacity to
do more than worry about the obstacles that prevent them from fulfilling their responsibilities, their concept of street-level leadership does not account for the farther reaching departures from established procedures of *Ikiru*’s clerk, *Stand and Deliver*’s teacher, or the creative practices foreshadowed in my preface to the dissertation. I want to argue that this view of street-level workers’ capacity to discern appropriate alternatives to official directives and to act on their understanding about effective practice underestimates their potential contributions to the work of governance.

Vinzant and Crothers’ contention that street-level workers can make only small adjustments to ongoing operations rather than more substantial changes to established routines, ongoing program operations, or the programs themselves is due to the limitations of both their concept of leadership and their methods for investigating street-level behavior. They see street-level leaders take only limited responsibility for the task of improving service delivery because their focus on the decision-making event constrains their view of how practitioners exercise the principle of responsiveness. The street-level leadership concept captures practitioners’ capacity to choose a course of action and to persuade their clients and partners that this choice is legitimate. Yet this focus on the decision taken in a specific moment precludes exploration of practitioners’ capacity to envision and enact improvements to ongoing practice. Their street-level leaders choose to do the right things without altering the routines to make programs work better for other clients in future situations.

Leadership as accountable decision-making misses the possibility of envisioning alternatives because the focus on responses to a specific situation overlooks how the workers examine underlying practice problems that impair the practitioners’ responses to similar challenges in repeated situations. In fact, Vinzant and Crothers explicitly assert that street-level workers are not capable of problem solving. They argue that the burdens of workers’ regular duties and ever-expanding workloads mean that they must concentrate on responding to short-term situations that demand immediate resolution (pp. 63-4). Street-level leaders, according to those who coined the phrase, resolve situational dilemmas; they do not solve enduring practice problems.

Vinzant and Crothers’ focus on the decision event also prevents them from examining how street-level actors engage in the third task of governance: the work of developing their capacity to improve program delivery and discern that their responses are appropriate. Although they depart from the common conceptualization of leadership as a function of fixed character traits,
the authors do not see learning how to visualize a better alternative and how to galvanize others to follow the vision as part of street-level leadership. Implicit in their recommendations about what managers can do to foster street-level leadership is the assumption that frontline workers cannot learn the skills of accountable discretion on their own.

In contrast, I examine how the self-sufficiency practitioners reflect on their practice away from the “action present” (Schön 1983, Raelin 1997). My observations of the practitioner discussion forums and follow-up interviews with its members allowed me to listen to accounts of their specific experiences as did the stories told to Maynard-Moody and Musheno and the vignettes told by Vinzant and Crothers. Yet unlike these collectors and re-constructors of street-level narratives, I also heard forum members discuss the nature of the obstacles to carrying out the directives and pursuing the objectives, their assessment of the merits of their proposed and practiced alternatives, and their thoughts about possible solutions. Forum members select their own topics of discussion based on felt pressures of practice rather than the questions posed by the decision event or researchers’ inquiry. Hence, the discourse focuses on problems of practice that they feel warrant further reflection both retrospectively and in relation to future practice.

I discovered that these reflections about specific practice problems in addition to situational dilemma of practice offer a distinctive opportunity to analyze the practitioners’ theories-in-use—their implicit ideas about what works and what is broken—even when they are not explicitly articulated or “espoused” as guides to action and learning (Argyris and Schön 1974, 1996). Moreover, the forum members talk about what they tried to do and what got in the way as well what they did and the results of their accomplishments. Such “war stories”—as Julian Orr (1996) refers to them in his investigation of problem solving among photocopy machine technicians—evidence the practitioners’ efforts to overcome practice problems that are otherwise elusive subjects of inquiry. Consequently, the discussion forums provided an opportunity to witness how street-level workers develop their capacity for appropriate improvements to ongoing practice. And where efforts proved unsatisfactory, they surfaced the limits of what is feasible for them to repair on their own.

My focus on specific programs is also more conducive to examining street-level efforts to contribute to the work of governance than are the studies of particular occupational groups such as teachers, counselors, police officers, and child welfare workers. In fact, Vinzant and Crothers purposely chose fields that do not entail longer term relationships with clients or treatment of
ongoing problems so as to narrow their study to isolated decision events. Police work and child welfare enforcement are also less a product of specific policy designs than of overall departmental mission and the regulations concerning professional (or semi-professional) conduct. The ethnographers might have witnessed more systematic solutions to practice problems had they observed workers’ efforts to interpret and modify detailed programmatic objectives and technologies and their accompanying regulations and established procedures.

Nor did the decision events Vinzant and Crothers examined capture the full range of street-level discretion. Both of their categories of discretion – that concerning the action taken and that concerning the outcome of the action – are delineated by the specific situation. Consequently, they did not examine street-level accountability in policy contexts that embody the system of governance perspective. As I elaborate in Chapter 2, the self-sufficiency programs that form the policy context of my study allow me to examine street-level behavior where workers have greater discretion to take responsibility for making programs work.

The fact that I investigate a considerably longer time horizon than any of the studies discussed in this chapter is an additional reason I witness more dramatic improvements to practice than previous research on street-level bureaucracy. The five-year period of observations of the forums (and the ten year time frame as extended by interviews and archived minutes and reports) has afforded the opportunity to examine incremental improvements resulting from the gradual accumulation of situational fixes to dilemma of practice. I have also been able to observe cycles of trial and error and reactions to changes in the implementation environment that illuminate the possibility of street-level initiated capacity development.

Moreover, my extended observations in the discussion forums allowed me to see how members learn from one another as well over time. In contrast, all of the post-Lipsky accounts of street-level behavior concentrate on individual workers as the focal actors. Although these post-Lipsky scholars of street-level behavior recognize the effects of peers and partners on their behavior, they do not provide an alternative account of group behavior to counter the depiction of bureaucratic solidarity as a mechanism for shirking responsibilities or sabotaging policies.

Vinzant and Crothers’ occasional observations of interactions among two-person work teams and

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2 Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith posit ten years as the minimum required for researching policy learning. See also Schofield 2004 on the time span required for studying learning in the context of policy implementation.
Maynard-Moody and Musheno's passing reference to exchanges about practice in staff meetings suggest that there is more to be learned about collective efforts to overcoming practice problems. This set of critiques and contrasts characterizes my practice-oriented and problem-centered approach to studying street-level practitioners' efforts to take responsibility for particular social service programs while being responsive to a variety of system actors in the context of a changing policy environment. As I explicated in the preface to the dissertation, this approach to the empirical research has illuminated both my analysis of the existing scholarship on street-level behavior and my attempts to build on recent advances in the understanding of what street-level workers are capable of contributing to each of the three tasks of governance.

**Pulling Together the Two Mismatch Explanations: Responsive Motives and Responsible Judgments:**

The recent empirically based research reviewed in the previous sections attenuates the classical theories about why street-level practitioners are perceived as part of the problem of unmet policy expectations rather than active participants in the system of democratic governance. These studies reject the contentions that frontline workers refuse to uphold the principles of responsiveness and responsibility. They have effectively replaced the view of an inevitable mismatch between street-level and policymaker's motives with the challenge of discerning appropriate expectations given diverse, and often conflicting, perspectives of multiple system actors. And they allow us to see that this is a challenge many frontline workers embrace.

While recent research affirms that mismatches between program designs and the implementation environment result in practice problems that often trigger coping mechanisms, those who have listened carefully to frontline workers and observed what they do in their daily practice, suggest that some street-level practitioners can exercise practical judgment to make appropriate adjustments to established procedures in specific situations, for individual clients, some of the time. By being responsive to their clients, their service delivery partners and other stakeholders, and the specific situation and by taking into account what they know from practice, these studies have found these workers to be more responsible system actors than the established images in popular culture and classical bureaucracy scholarship. In sum, recent scholarship suggests that many frontline human service workers strive to get the regulations right and – when they discern that the rules are insufficient guides to appropriate practice – they sometimes try to
do the right thing to serve their clients without compromising policy intentions or professional and social norms.

Building on these findings and the implications I have drawn from them, I now take a step further to ask how much more is feasible for street-level service workers to contribute to the work of governance. If we understand that many are motivated to serve their clients, have accumulated substantial knowledge from practice, and are capable of communicating with other system actors and occasionally of persuading them to pursue an alternative course of action, how much more might they do – and how much more some are actually doing -- to make programs work better for the entire clientele?

To guide my analysis of my empirical observations, I now turn to what we know about how other system actors assume this responsibility for improving programs by pursuing strategies to take advantage of existing resources and to develop their capacity to generate and legitimate innovative alternatives to the usual business of government by deliberating with others.

1.3 The Capacity for Greater Contributions to the Work of Governance: Questioning Mismatches Between Street-level Workers and Other System Actors

In this section, I move from questioning the low expectations of street-level workers to probing how high we might raise our expectations of what is feasible for them to contribute to the work of governance. To do so, I challenge two commonly held assumptions about the differences – or, for the sake of parallelism, mismatches -- between the capacity of street-level workers and other system actors to innovate and deliberate with others.

In the introduction to Part I, I noted that the actors featured in the accounts of bureaucratic entrepreneurship tend to operate in the executive offices rather than the street-level cubicles of public serving agencies. The contrast between expectations of those at these opposite ends of the organizational hierarchy is reflected in the language typically used to describe how each responds to the freedom from strict compliance associated with the system of governance perspective. For executives and managers, increased flexibility is understood as the fuel for innovation. For frontline workers, on the other hand, expanded discretion is seen as the grease for coping mechanisms.

Similarly, those who contend that public deliberation promises better agendas for policy intervention and more engaged, committed, and even empowered stakeholders tend to identify citizens as the key interlocutors. Street-level workers typically remain behind the scenes and in
the periphery of this discourse. Despite the critical roles frontline workers play in carrying out social service programs, the system of governance perspective has yet to generate new organizing structures for developing their capacity to uphold the principles of responsiveness and responsibility.

In the first half of this section, I unpack the implicit assumption that the capacity to innovate is poorly matched with frontline workers' limited authority to dictate changes in operations or access new resources. I examine what can be learned from the strategies executives and managers employ to create additional value from available resources and relationships with other system actors. I then draw from the social psychologists' concept of creativity as a more feasible objective for street-level workers to pursue by means of these strategies. In the second half, I again import a concept that has appeared only rarely in public management contexts to learn how frontline workers might use the strategies of deliberating with others to develop their capacity for creativity; I propose that the practitioner discussion forums can be understood as communities of practice. I posit that the organizing structures that isolate human service workers in their office cubicles serve to reinforce the mismatched expectations for their responsive and responsible contributions and I suggest that the opportunity to meet regularly with those who confront similar practice problems in different organizations helps to develop the capacity for participating more effectively in the work of governance.

**Strategies to Extract the “Latent Potential” for Innovation: (or Strategies for Creating Value from Existing Resources)**

Much of the discourse on public sector innovation aims to establish that leaders of public serving agencies can steer their organizations towards rather than away from the objectives they are expected to pursue. This endeavor has spawned volumes that laud executives who have resurrected floundering agencies so as to disprove by counter-example the contention that the ideals of transformed governance are mere abstractions (eg. Moore 1995; Borins 1998; Levin and Sanger 1994). Thick descriptions of such “best practices” are also intended to serve as models for leaders of other agencies to emulate. While the assumption that what is “best” in one agency or policy domain is an adequate guide to superlative performance elsewhere is a questionable management philosophy for any public executive, the principle of transferability is an even more tenuous guide for frontline actors. Even if the innovations are directly applicable to the specific context, street-level workers lack the power and resources to initiate major
reforms on their own. To explore how the stereotype-defying frontline workers described in the previous sections might take on greater responsibility for improving ongoing program operations, we need to look beyond celebration of achievements to strategies for innovating.

I have culled two strategies for producing novel approaches to program delivery from the public management discourse that promise to be particularly adaptable to street-level use. Each employs already available resources and relies on the kinds of knowledge and communication skills I identified earlier in this chapter. One strategy involves transforming established policy regulations and official procedures. The other draws on the resources and skills of partners in different departments and organizations. To use Eugene Bardarch’s (1996/2005; 1998) terminology, these are strategies for crafting new value out of the “latent potential” of the implementation environment, the same terrain that produces practice problems.

**Bricolage – Innovation through Adapting Program Regulations and Organizational Routines:** Program regulations and organizational routines or procedures are the devices policymakers and public managers employ to direct implementation behavior. In this respect, they are the mechanisms of control and stability and the antithesis of discretion or flexibility. Increasingly, however, management scholarship has recognized how organizational routines also function as mechanisms for strategic change or adaptation (Feldman 2000, Feldman and Pentland 2003, Adler and Borys 1996). New technologies and products develop as people use the routines in new ways and combine them or transform them to create novel approaches to emergent challenges.

Among the advantages of *bricolage* – as Levi-Strauss (1966) has termed this innovation strategy in other cultural contexts – is that it employs materials that are easily obtained and with little cost other than the effort of redesign (Baker and Nelson 1995). Equally important for those with limited decision-making authority, is the fact that relevant stakeholders in the implementation process already recognize the components of the novel approach as consistent with established operations. The design of the innovation contains the source of its legitimation;

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3 In much of the management literature, discussion about organizational structures, routines, and cognitive schemas as “resources” for affecting change is rooted in the work of “structuration theorists” such as Giddens 1984, Bourdieu, Sewell 1992, and Swidler 1986. Others, reference Levi-Strauss’ concept of *bricolage* to explain the reinterpretation or modification of existing practices or the “reflective manipulation of a set of resources accumulated through experience, with the range of manipulation neither totally free nor constrained to the original manifestation of any element” (Orr 1996 p. 122). The idea that these materials of practice are also tools for re-invention is apparent in Swidler’s metaphor of the “cultural tool kit” or repertoire of routines that can be used in varying contexts and Balkin’s more contemporary metaphor of “cultural software” (1998).
all that remains is to guide prospective objectors to make sense of the new in terms of the familiar (Weick 1995). This sensemaking strategy also converts ambiguity from a source of confusion into a resource for innovation.

As the prior discussion of the classical conceptions of street-level behavior conveyed, the manipulability of official procedures, regulations, and other bureaucratic structures has long been understood to facilitate street-level bureaucrats’ pursuits of objectives that diverge from those of their superiors. Their exclusive understanding of the intricacies of organizational procedures facilitates both the goal deflecting behaviors of shirking and sabotage and the goal consistent efforts to adapt rules to fit the particular needs of selected clients in specific situations. In an environment where innovation is encouraged, in contrast, ambiguity opens opportunities for multiple re-interpretations of objectives and directives to legitimate more radical alternatives to the status quo (March and Levitt 1999; Weick 1995).

Street-level workers have been among participants in recent studies of how organizational actors use existing routines to construct new approaches to organizational and policy challenges (eg. Feldman 2000, 2004; Feldman and Pentland 2003; Baez and Abolafia 2002). Yet, as street-level workers are not the primary actors in these accounts, the studies do not indicate what is feasible for them to accomplish on their own. A notable exception is Jodi Sandfort’s (2000, 2003) research in welfare offices and employment and training agencies which sought to describe how front-line welfare workers employ organizational routines and cognitive schema strategically. However, her observations of street-level practice evidenced the use of such strategies to resist the changes posed by welfare reform or to cope with the added strains of people-changing work rather than to create new approaches to overcoming practice problems. This lack of evidence for street-level bricolage and strategic sensemaking to improve programs does not prove that it cannot be done. As altering rules and routines leave few tangible residues, previous studies may have simply overlooked street-level practitioners’ efforts to use this strategy for creating value-adding departures from established practices.

**Collaboration Across Programmatic and Organizational Boundaries to Create New Resources:** Creating additional value through cooperation among actors in the service delivery system has received considerably more attention in public management scholarship and practice than the art of regulatory bricolage (Litwak and Hylton 1962, Hjern and Porter 1981, Provan and

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4 I examine Sandfort’s work more extensively in the following chapter on self-sufficiency policies.
Milward 1995, Agranoff and MacGuire 2001, 2003). Indeed, the idea that multiple actors are involved in producing policy results is at the core of the governance paradigm; diverse actors work together to improve policy designs as well as legitimate alternative directions (O'Toole 1997; Bardach and Lesser 1997; Keyes et al 1997; Page 2004; Hill and Hupe 2002). Here, the materials for innovation are service budgets and other material resources of each program and agency and the competencies of each actor. When organizational actors pool these resources and take advantage of their complementary capabilities, they are often able to do more than each could achieve independently (Alter and Hage 1993, Alexander 1995; Bardach 1998; Mandell 2001).

How much “latent potential” for value creation there is within a service delivery system is a function of the degree of inter-dependence among the actors and the extent to which they bring different and complementary types of resources and competencies to the alliance (Lawrence and Lorch 1991, Pfeffer and Salancik 1978, Alter and Hage 1993, Alexander 1995, Gray 1998, Bardach 1998). Interdependence is greater when potential partners share service goals and strategies and serve common constituencies. Inter-relationships among clients’ service needs also foster agency interdependencies as when clients receiving one type of treatment require subsequent treatment offered by another organization or when treatments of multiple facets of the clients’ needs must occur simultaneously (O’Toole and Montjoy 1984, Scharpf 1993).

The gains from accessing the complementary skills and resources of potential partners are the incentive to cooperate. Yet differences among potential partners with respect to their conceptualization of the policy problem, their preferred strategies for addressing the problems, and their priorities for doing so also deter cooperation. Where differences are not substantial enough to thwart cooperation all together, they may exacerbate transaction costs of working across organizational boundaries; partners need to learn one another’s service domains with sufficient fluency to comprehend procedures and appreciate concerns and sensitivities (Briggs 2003; Page 2003). Costs of cooperation also include the loss of autonomy especially where goals and strategies of service work do not overlap completely or where partners doubt one another’s competency or dependability (Bardach and Lesser 1997; Page 2003). The partners’ trust in one another’s ability to follow through with commitments is especially important when cooperation is not mandated by policy design and when the collaborative agreement is not accompanied by an additional stream of funding (Oliver 1991, 1997).
The actualization of the potential of cross-agency cooperation also depends on the extent to which the actors recognize this potential, have the skills to work cooperatively, and are motivated to do so. The compatibility of agencies' service agendas and the procedures for carrying them out are not fixed and finite; they are malleable, particularly where actors in each agency have discretion to make necessary adjustments. Thus the techniques of sensemaking and other forms of persuasion that are essential to changing established operating procedures and within organizations may also reinforce the sense of interdependency across organizations. Moreover, effective communication and persuasion across organizational boundaries can be learned. Interorganizational collaboration is a craft that can improve with practice, constructive feedback, and opportunities to benefit from those with more experience (Bardach 1998; Hardy et al. 2003). Motivation to enter into cooperative relations with other system actors must be sufficient to overcome the challenges—a type of practice problem—that emerge in the course of actualizing the latent potential of combined competencies and resources.

How much is gained from the efforts to work together depends on the breadth of the differences bridged, the degree of acknowledged interdependence, established level of trust among participants, their skills in cooperative action, and the strength of their motivation to make the joint effort work. These factors influence both the intensity of the cooperation and the value added as a result. On the lower end of the spectrum, partners coordinate their activities with only minimal ongoing interaction; the gains are in terms of time and other resources saved for clients as well as other system actors. At the higher end of the spectrum, interorganizational collaboration creates new resources and opportunities for clients and improves ongoing operations of each agency. The success of each of these levels of cooperation is also contingent upon the sufficiency of funding, the adequacy of existing service technologies, and competency for fulfilling basic obligations. Without these foundational elements, no degree of joint activity will resolve the limitations of policy designs and constraints in the implementation environment (Rein 1983; Briggs 2003).

Finally, the same principles of cooperation apply to extracting the potential value from under-developed intra-organizational differences and dependencies or synergies (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Ancona and Caldwell 1992; Orlikowsky 2002, Carlile 2004). The phenomenon of disconnections among agencies programs is among the unintended by-products of the system of governance. As organizations pursue federal contracts to carry out services, it is increasingly
common for organizations with compatible goals and strategies and similar target populations to operate under the same roof without any planned interaction (Smith and Lipsky 1993).

Alternatively, disparate agendas create internal tensions or conflicts as departments compete for resources and attention. The craft of recognizing and actualizing the latent potential for value adding alliances is thus pertinent for intra-organizational innovation as well.

Street-level practitioners are often vital to the success of inter-organizational cooperation; the front-lines are the site of the interface, the real rather than the simply theorized space where the synergies come into play (Weiss 1981; Meyers 1993; Considine and Lewis 1999; Pindus et al 2000; Ragan 2003, Corbin and Noyes 2003). Nevertheless, street-level workers are generally not the conveners or designers of these innovation strategies in the accounts of inter-organizational collaboration. As discussed in relation to the previous mismatch explanations, relationships among street-level workers and their counterparts in other service agencies and departments are more frequently depicted as the source of practice problems instead of the resources for innovation. In the principal-agency theories, conflicting interests spur antagonistic relationships and in Lipsky’s contingency theory, inadequate program designs and scarce resources prevent street-level workers from establishing the level of competency and dependability essential to establishing trust and commitment to joint action. Where relationships are positive, they result in more modest forms of coordination and focus on effective referrals or service planning for individual clients rather than improvements to ongoing practice or development of new resources and programmatic elements to make programs work better for the entire clientele.

Again, Jodi Sandfort’s research is an exception. Her study of welfare officers and employment placement workers aimed to document more productive relationships at the front-lines of public serving organizations (1999). As with the sensemaking strategy, however, her observations largely reinforce claims that street-level workers are not capable of participating in this aspect of the work of governance. Failure to share information, insufficient understanding of partners’ work practices, and the view that front-line counterparts resorted too frequently to coping mechanisms instead of overcoming obstacles eroded the basis for trust and communication and ultimately precluded effective cooperation. The legacy of poor relations between the participating organizations and different underlying program philosophies about how to enact the welfare reform agenda exacerbated the conflicts on the front-lines. Although Sandfort found exceptions to this rule among “a few good workers,” she did not find sufficient
evidence of this counter-trend to analyze what makes them succeed or what is gained from their interactions.

As with the other innovation strategy, the absence of evidence does not constitute proof that street-level practitioners are not capable of improving ongoing practice through working cooperatively with their counterparts in other organizations and departments. Programs designs and management structures that allow practitioners greater flexibility to venture out of their office cubicles may well create opportunities for them to interact with potential partners so as to learn about potential synergies and work together to put them into place. In theory, the practitioners' knowledge about their clients' needs and about what works in practice could precipitate better ways of interacting with colleagues and new ways of combining existing resources. Conceivably, such knowledge and regular contact with clients could constitute a resource to exchange with actors beyond the traditional members of the service delivery system, including those positioned at higher decision making levels in their agencies. Such partners potentially bring resources and competencies that have yet to be introduced to service models in those domains. More evidence of how workers who are motivated to serve their clients and have opportunities to develop the competencies for forging value-adding relationships with potential partners is necessary to assess the feasibility of innovation at the frontlines of service providing organizations.

Street-Level Creativity As a More Feasible Alternative to Innovation

My analysis of the self-sufficiency practitioners' responses to practice problems in Part II of the dissertation examines how they employ these two innovation strategies instead of merely coping with the challenges or making situational adjustments for particular clients. As I implied in my critique of recent scholarship on street-level behavior, however, the immediate contributions of their efforts to improve programs may be difficult to discern. Whereas the documentation of entrepreneurial executives' "best practices" typically reference impressive increases in program outcomes, it is not realistic to expect those with relatively limited authority and unrecognized expertise to enact changes of the same scope as the managers above them in
the organizational hierarchy. In addition, street-level contributions may well be more difficult to
measure, even with the relatively long time frame of my research.\(^5\)

Thus to facilitate my analysis of the self-sufficiency practitioners’ efforts to improve
ongoing practice, I need a construct that is suitable to capturing more subtle and ephemeral
additions of value. Moreover, because my objective is to understand what is feasible to expect
from street-level workers, I want to distinguish between their efforts to employ the strategies and
the resistance they may encounter in putting their novel ideas into practice. This analytic
distinction between the practitioners’ capacity to act and the environments that structure their
activity is critical to advancing management practices and policy designs that are more
conducive to street-level participation in the work of governance. Social psychologists’ concept
of creativity provides a close alternative to innovation that is more feasible for front-line actors
to pursue.

Creativity and innovation share two central elements: the product or response and the
activity or task of producing the product or pursuing the response. A product, procedure, idea, or
process is creative when actors familiar with the field of operation consider it to be novel, useful,
and acceptable or appropriate to the task at hand (Amabile 1988/96; Woodman et al 1993). This
emphasis on novelty and the requirement of legitimating the novelty as valuable as well as
different is central to the definitions innovation as well (Thompson 1969; Van de Ven 1986;
Altshuler and Behn 1997; Zegans 1997). Also consistent with some definitions of innovation is
the idea that creativity involves a process of adaptation and change (Ogilvie 1998, Drazin et al
1999).

The chief differences between creativity and innovation concern how creative responses are
adopted and institutionalized and how the value of the novelty is affirmed. Creativity involves
divergent thinking or exploration of previously uncharted territory rather than a straight path
towards a clearly defined goal or solution. In fact, the discovery of the problem and clarification
of the goal are often part of the creative process (Amabile 1988/96 pp. 35-7).\(^6\) Innovation may
or may not derive from such creative discursiveness.

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\(^5\) The emphasis on performance measurement among “new management” scholars not withstanding, methodological
constraints mean that much of the research on interorganizational collaboration has not evidenced causal
connections to program outcomes.

\(^6\) This point echoes Thompson’s previously noted emphasis on adaptation and change as opposed to stability and
parallels Amabile’s (1996) distinction between algorithmic and heuristic tasks, Argyris and Schön’s (1996) single-
loop and double-looped learning process, and March and Olsen’s contrast between exploitation and exploration.
A more distinctive contrast is the one Theresa Amabile and her colleagues (1996) draw between creativity as the production of novel and useful ideas and innovation as the successful implementation of creative ideas within an organization and their discernable outcomes. Creativity is the first and necessary step in the innovation process, yet for an idea to be considered creative, it need not be formally adopted as an innovation. Thus, like innovation, creativity requires pro-active and strategic change rather than re-active responses to challenges. Yet in contrast to innovation, creativity does not demand the power to institutionalize the changes once conceived. This distinction between the creative idea from the impacts from its implementation is especially useful for identifying street-level practitioners’ capacity for improving social service programs. The practitioners’ knowledge of the practice problems and their motivation to use their knowledge to help clients may be enough to generate new and valuable ideas even if they lack the authority, influence, or resources to carry them out and institutionalize them within their organizations and the service delivery system.

The differentiation of creativity from innovation as resulting in outcomes means that the assessment of creativity is primarily subjective; it depends on the judgments of those who have knowledge about a historically and culturally specific context rather than the evidence of objectively measurable outcomes (Amabile 1988/96; Woodman et al 1993). Assessments of creativity vary in light of the particular people doing the assessment, the field in which the actors have expertise, and the cultural domain of symbolic rules and meaning systems (Csikzentimihalyi 1996, Ford 1996). To apply this principle to the policy context, creativity is relative to the particular domain of the program design and regulations as discerned by the diverse actors within the field comprised of clients, actors in the three spheres of the implementation environment: the practitioners’ own organizations, the service delivery system, and the broader economic and policy environment.

This “consensual definition of creativity,” as Amabile characterizes it, addresses the challenges of discerning the value of novel responses to the complex practice problems of social service work given the frequently long time lag between interventions and results. A response to a practice problem may be judged as creative before the results of “novelty in action” (Altshuler

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[7] Woodman et al add an additional distinction between creativity and innovation as outcome that I do not adopt here. They designate adaptations of pre-existing products or processes or those imported from external sources as innovations that are not creative. I include them as creative if they involve departures from routines that must be legitimated.
and Zegans 1997) are apparent. In this sense, the assessment of creativity entails two tasks of governance; it involves discerning whether departures from prescribed directives are both appropriate and valuable improvements.

Conceiving of creativity as a valued departure from habit or routine helps to operationalize this subjective assessment (Ford 1996). With respect to policy implementation, these habits or routines are the official regulations and established operating procedures. The notion of departure surfaces an additional distinction between innovation and creativity. As Figure 1.3 suggests, innovation and creativity have different orientations towards novelty. While innovation adopts a forward-looking focus on proven outcomes of the novelty, creativity looks towards its origins – the practice problems that trigger the pursuit of departures from established routines and the latent potential in the environment that supplies the resources for the production of novelty. In this sense, the assessment of creativity entails two tasks of governance; it involves discerning whether departures from prescribed directives are both appropriate and valuable improvements.

The idea of creativity as valued departures from routines also differentiates creativity from the street-level behaviors discussed in the previous sections of this chapter. Compliance with the regulations – getting the rules right – is not creative because it does not involve a departure and because following the established routines is not valuable if it fails to resolve the practice problems. Coping mechanisms entail departures from the routines that are decidedly not valued. The situational adjustments of doing the right things for individual clients in specific situations are small and valued departures from the rules, yet they do not introduce novelty to the routines themselves. Creativity, in contrast, entails new ideas for ongoing practice that extend beyond discreet situations or decision taking events to make programs better. Thus creativity, like innovation, is about changing established systems. However, the scope of the change may range from small to substantial departures in how systems operate (Amabile 1996 especially pp. 38-9 on the value of studying creativity at its lower levels). Progressive degrees of departure from established regulations and procedures may correspond to increases in the extent of value gained.

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8 This reference to routines complements the earlier discussion of routines as the basis for innovation in the discussion of bricolage and sensemaking in the previous section. Indeed, Ford, Woodman et al, and Drazin et al present sensemaking as the primary strategy of creativity.

9 Ford urges us to think of creativity in relation to the entire innovation process in addition to the idea generating phase. His point that the creative ideas that precede results can occur during the implementation of the innovation or in its subsequent revisions is consistent with this characterization of orientations.
Figure 1.3  Creative Street-Level Practice

- Program Designs
- Practice Problems
- Theories-in-Use
- Creative Practices
- Goals Pursued as interpreted
- Improved Practice
- Innovation as Sustained Creative Practice
- Goals Achieved & Expectations Met

**Creative Street-Level Practice**

Deliberation within the community of practice

Organizational Context

Social Service Delivery Systems

Broader Social and Policy Environment
once the ideas are implemented as outcome producing innovations. Yet even small deviations can add value to the quality of services received by the entire clientele.

The centrality of the inherently collective assessment of whether the departures from established routines are valuable raises an additional question about the feasibility of street-level service workers to generate creative ideas for action. Given their relative isolation from other system actors and the time pressures of encounters when they occur in the course of responding to specific situations, how are they to receive feedback?

**Practitioner Discussion Forums as Communities of Practice**

Earlier, I introduced the practitioner discussion forums as a strategy for researching the self-sufficiency practitioners' contributions to the work of governance. I now want to propose that they are not only venues for researching street-level practice; they are also venues for fostering street-level creativity. My observations led me to see the discussion forums as organizing structures that allow otherwise isolated practitioners to join their counterparts on the frontlines of other agencies for the collective work that creativity requires. In this section, I ground what I have gleaned from my observations in what we know about similar organizing structures for deliberating with others so as to frame my further analysis of the self-sufficiency practitioners' responses to practice problems in the chapters of Part II.

As I posited in the introduction to Part I, deliberating with others is one means to uphold the principle that it is possible to develop the capacity of system actors to engage in the work of discerning appropriateness and improving programs. This type of discourse is a more intensive interaction than the street-level leaders' consultations to ensure accountability to multiple stakeholders. Deliberation not only entails being responsive to others; it also requires taking responsibility for generating new approaches to further the mutual goals of participants in the dialogue.

In some respects, the practitioner discussion forums can be seen as street-level workers' variants of the public forums where citizens are invited to help shape policy directions. Both organizing structures augment the capacity of otherwise marginalized actors to participate in the work of governance. Yet there are also important differences between the practitioners' and

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citizens' venues for deliberation. Linda DeLeon's taxonomy of organizing structures for promoting accountability and responsibility illuminates these distinctions. Whereas citizens' forums are examples of "competitive arenas" dedicated to resolving ambiguity and conflict about policy goals, the practitioner forums are more akin to "communities" where professionals remedy uncertainty as to how to pursue clearly understood goals (L. DeLeon 1998, 2003). In the former, decision systems are political and those who represent the views of distinct stakeholder groups employ the competitive pluralism of bargaining, negotiation, and compromise. In the latter, professional expertise guides decisions made by consensus within collegial structures.

Sensemaking and collaboration are consistent with the consensual, collegial approach to accountability and responsibility. Although the practice problems that precipitate the pursuit of alternatives may derive from such ambiguity and conflict, both strategies entail interpreting goals more than engaging in contests between competing objectives. Indeed, the use of the strategies is predicated on initial agreement about shared purpose. Moreover, creativity, as defined above, necessitates interpretation of value that, in a policy context, is a function of the goals, whether those explicitly articulated in the formal regulations or implicit in its underlying assumptions.

However, although the practitioner forums are collegial, they are decidedly not professional communities. By definition – and my focus – the human service workers lack professional credentials that afford justification without acknowledged public representation. Although surveys and anecdotal evidence suggest that frontline service workers think of themselves as professionals and expect to be treated as such, their expertise is not evident to others (Lipsky 1980, Light 2003, Hupe and Hill 2007).

I propose that the idea of communities of practice as useful alternative organizing structure that combines aspects of Linda DeLeon's arenas of competitive citizens and professional communities. Communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al 2002: 5). Unlike either the professional experts in DeLeon's communities or the executives featured in publications about entrepreneurial public bureaucracies, "community of practice" feature actors who, like human

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11 DeLeon characterizes traditional compliance-oriented and leader-dominated bureaucracies as the organizing structures that emerge when both ends and means are certain and not contentious and anarchies as those that occur where informal networks and unchanneled inspiration substitute for certainty and agreement. DeLeon's taxonomy is informed by the literature on types of accountability initiated to a large extent by Romzek and colleagues cited in the introduction to Part I.
service practitioners, enjoy little official decision-making and direction-setting authority within their organizations. They tend to have uncredentialed or minimally credentialed occupational expertise and they occupy roles that are more circumscribed by formal regulations than are those of managers at the helm of innovating bureaucracies.

The concept of the community of practice originated in scholarship that aimed to capture how learning occurs among artisans and trade workers (eg. blacksmiths, tailors, butchers, and midwives – Lave and Wenger 1991) and other practitioners who do hands-on-work at the ground levels of their organizations (eg. Orr’s 1996 aforementioned study of photocopy machine service workers and Wenger’s 1998 ethnographic analysis of insurance claim workers). More recently, the concept of the community of practice has been applied to a wide range of practices, particularly in the knowledge intensive fields of technology and other areas where the market demands a rapid pace of innovation (Wenger et al 2002).

Communities of practice vary widely in their configuration and ways of operating. Some include members working in the same field while others bring together people with a range of areas of expertise (Chaiklin and Lave 1993; Wenger et al. 2002). Some operate within a single department, others are inter-departmental, and still others span organizations to form an entirely new unit of action (Brown and Duguid 1991). Early research explored communities of practice that emerged spontaneously in the field. More recently, managers and other enterprising decision-makers have begun to cultivate communities of practice as a means to share and generate new knowledge (Wenger et al 2002; Swan et al 2002; Snyder, 2003).

Although the promise of deepening knowledge and expertise with those who share a common practice would seem to have direct applications to the work of governance, and creative street-level practice, the community of practice perspective is only recently being applied within the policy and management field with little if any attention to street-level practitioners specifically.12 The community of practice as an organizing structure for street-level learning and practice improvement has four advantages over traditional bureaucratic relationships: a focus on

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12 Noteworthy exceptions to research on “communities of practice” in the public policy arena include Snyder and Briggs’ (2003) report on collective learning and problem solving in federally sponsored and facilitated communities of practice that brought together practitioners working on similar issues from different sectoral perspectives. Wagenaar and Cook (2003) and Waagenar (2004) draw on the ideas of the community of practice literature in their discussion of knowledge generation among mid-level public administrators. In the world of community development practice, a recent issue of Shelterforce reports on the fruits of participation in “communities of practice” for a group of ten executive directors of community development corporations (Steigerwald, 2004). None of these publications, however, have focused on communities comprised exclusively of street-level practitioners.
personal interests or motivations, learning from practice, community relationships, and -- as my critical reading of the concept suggests -- empowerment. Each of these characteristics incorporates principles of deliberative democracy and conditions conducive to creative street-level practice that are absent from the typical street-level working conditions.

**Shared Personal Interests:** The common domain or set of issues to which members of the community of practice are committed is one of the distinctive features of the community of practice. Membership is voluntary and is based on personal interests rather than official organizational roles or contractual obligations. Yet in contrast to the self-interests portrayed in the classical views of street-level bureaucrats, these personal interests concern the shared practice of the members and their motivation to learn how to improve that practice. Members bring their different practical experiences to the community. They include newcomers to the practice as well as veterans, from distinct organizations and places, with independent local relationships, and unique stories about their efforts to address the challenges of ongoing practice.

In examining participation in the street-level practitioners’ forums, I investigate the ways in which participation in the community of practice afford such transformation of the personal into the collective and the internalization of the collective into the personal.

**Learning From Practice:** The community of practice also holds the norms of good practice and educates its members about the norms in ways that compensate for the limitations of official job descriptions and procedural manuals (Brown and Duguid 1991). Learning among members of a community of practice thus provides the occasions for informal learning similar to the networking opportunities of trade conferences (H. Hill 2003) or team-based learning (Foldy 2008; Edmonson et al 2001) that are beginning to enter public management practice.

In this sense, the community provides the guide for doing the right things in the eyes of its members. The opportunity to tell one another the war stories of practice on an ongoing basis creates a repertoire of lessons for problem-solving that are stored in the community’s collective memory (Orr 1996; Wenger 1998, etc). This emphasis on doing the right things in the eyes of community members has been the focus of studies of the indoctrination of novices to crafts and trades where learning by doing is the standard training mechanism (Lave and Wenger 1991; Chaiken and Lave 1993). As I noted in my critique of Vinzant and Crothers, such cumulative learning was not captured in the previous accounts of street-level discourse or the examples of situational adjustments the official regulations. Given the high levels of turnover among social
service workers, this form of learning is a potentially significant contribution to diffusing appropriate practice across the frontlines of public serving bureaucracies.

Much of the community of practice literature has focused on mastering crafts rather than developing that craft in creative ways. Yet recent experimentation in the context of enterprising industries among executives and engineers suggests that communities of practice are also venues for generating new knowledge (Wenger et al. 2002). Conveners of such learning forums recognize the potential for knowledge production that derives from the interaction among members with different perspectives and sources of knowledge as well as a common set of interests. Moreover, the learning process in such venues does not necessarily follow a linear process of rational analysis depicted in the traditional theories of problem solving and learning that Rein and Vinzant and Crothers assert street-level practitioners are incapable of pursuing. Rather, it more closely fits John Forester’s (1991) description of deliberative practitioners who work and learn collaboratively with others:

“The deliberative practitioner learns from conversation and argument, the actual interpretation and reconstruction of what parties working together say or do. In deliberative practice, critical listening, reflection-in-action, and constructive argument all interact.” (p. 12)

Although the practitioners whose knowledge derives from operating the same programs in similar contexts bring less varied materials for learning, their experiences with diverse clients, partners, and the dilemma of practice nevertheless hold the potential for illuminating contrasts as well as comparisons. In the chapters of Part II, I examine how the discussions about both the similarities and differences in the practitioners experience contribute to their capacity to improve their ongoing practice. And as I suggested at the end of the previous section, the forums offer an opportunity to examine the extent to which such discussion engages their theories-in-use in this learning process and fosters the collective generation of creative solutions to common practice problems in addition to opportunities for sharing lessons accumulated across members’ individual practices and over time.

*Community:* The fact that members of the community of practice are connected with one another through relationships based on common interests rather than prescribed organizational roles influences the character of the relationships as well as the opportunity for learning. In contrast to the hierarchical dyads of state-agent and client-agent relationships and the consultative relationships within the informal, inter-organizational network of service providers,
these collegial relationships form the bonds of community. The connections are based on a sense of belonging rather than interdependencies (Wenger 1998). Like the stakeholders in many examples of participatory governance, the work lives of community of practice members are independent of one another; they come together to learn, yet act autonomously within their home organizations. At the same time, the members also engage with one another in enduring relationships rather than isolated decision-informing events. In this sense, they resemble the “permanently mobilized deliberative democratic grassroots forms” such as the neighborhood councils that guide school reform, community policing, or citizen-led budgeting rather than the “relatively brief democratic moments” of other forms of resident participation (Fung and Wright 2003: 22-3).13

I investigate how the practitioner discussion forums embody that sense of belonging and mutual support of communities of practice. I ask how the forums provide ongoing support and encouragement for creative street-level practice that is absent from the constraining environment typical of the frontlines of public service agencies. I probe whether the bonds of the community create a forgiving atmosphere for encouraging risk taking in the spirit of generating creative alternatives to established practices. I examine the role of the forums in recognizing members’ efforts and rewarding achievements when they are overlooked in their own agencies. And I investigate how discussions in those forums delineate goals that are sufficiently challenging to motivate the creative process while recognizing the limits of what is feasible from the members’ frontline positions.

Empowering Members: The possibility that collective inquiry within the community of practice might generate farther reaching departures from established routines raises the question of how coming together as a community might strengthen the practitioners’ capacity to enact their creative ideas. To date, scholarship in the community of practice perspective has not addressed issues of power within the groups of practitioners or between the communities and those with greater authority in the members’ respective organizations (Bechky 2003; Swan, Scarbrough & Robertson 2002).14

13 Communities of practice also embody the enduring relationships and shared working conditions of occupational communities (Van Maanen and Barley 1984) whose members engage in joint activities in domains of homelife as well as worklife. In contrast, the bonds of members of communities of practice are devoted almost exclusively to the pursuit of programmatic objectives; they are bonds of practice and for practice.

14 This assumption of collegiality devoid of conflict underlies DeLeon’s heuristic taxonomy. Logically, communities of professionals can engage in the political struggles of bargaining, negotiation, and other advocacy
Yet what we know about participatory governance structures involving other marginalized stakeholders suggests that ongoing forums for practitioner discussions may allow them to develop their capacity for action despite their lack of power within their organizations. In theory, the members of the community of practice could raise their collective voices so that they are heard by those with greater decision making authority and access to resources as in the “empowered participatory governance structures” Fung and Wright (2003) describe. Even if the stories told in the communities of social service workers are heard only by the fellow members, they may develop members’ capacity for judgment, skills in exercising the strategies of creative practice, and consequently develop their sense of self- and collective efficacy (Forester 1999; Hajer 2003; Elster 1998; Fung 2003).

My research examines the channels of communication available to the practitioner discussion forums and the extent to which members’ collective efforts augment their power to realize creative ideas. I also call attention to how the forum members contend with disagreements that emerge within the group. I investigate what happens when conflicts erupt and when disagreements are sublimated and ask how their approach to resolving disputed differences influences their capacity to influence one another’s actions and act collectively.

In the chapters of Part II, I bring together these four advantages of the communities of practice, with the attention to conflict and power, to suggest that the forums help develop the self-sufficiency practitioners capacity to engage in the work of governance in two respects. Engaging together, community members develop their competencies to employ the two strategies and assess whether the resulting novelties add value. As organizing structures, they provide the capacity for engaging in those collective efforts.

1.4 Creative Street-Level Practice

The two strategies for generating novel approaches to service delivery, the concept of creativity, and the idea of the practitioner discussion forums as communities of practice for developing the capacity for creativity comprise an alternative conception of what is feasible to expect street-level workers to contribute to the work of governance. I combine these ideas in the techniques as the efforts of social movement organizations such as Physicians for Social Responsibility evidence (McCally 2002).
conception of *creative street-level practice* that I conceived in the course of my fieldwork and elaborated through the critical analysis of the scholarship discussed in this chapter. (See Figure 1.3.) I present this conception here to guide the analysis of my empirical findings in the chapters of Part II and in the conclusion in Part III.

**Creative Street-Level Practices:** Creative street-level practices are departures from established regulations and procedures that are deemed valuable to the program and its entire clientele based on evidence of what works and the assessments of the community of practice. Creative street-level practices, are thus not merely good solutions to situational dilemmas or even novel ideas in the abstract. Rather, they are novel *practices* or new ways of working with the resources available in the implementation environment. Creative practices are the products of street-level practitioners’ efforts to employ the strategies innovation – sensemaking or bricolage and coordination and collaboration – to take advantage of those resources in novel ways in order to address the practice problems that emerge in the course of their work.

Practitioners’ may develop and adopt creative practices on their own and share them members of the community of practice. Or members of the forums may pursue the strategies together to create new practices and program elements that benefit clients across organizations or enrich the program itself.

Sometimes the creative practices yield tangible results that substantiate the value of the departures from established routines. These results may precede evidence of actual client outcomes yet they are considered instrumental to achieving those outcomes. For example, novel solutions to the challenge of client outreach are deemed creative practices when there is evidence of increased enrollment rates, an easily measurable result. While enrollment does not ensure that program goals are met, it is undoubtedly a necessary precondition to successful implementation.

Where creative responses to practice problems do not lend themselves to immediate and tangible results, the value of the departures from routine is assessed in relation to the practitioners’ knowledge from practice, from their own experiences and from their interactions with other actors in the service environment. (The challenges of motivating clients to pursue their goals for achieving economic self-sufficiency exemplify this ephemeral terrain for creative practice.) My research suggests that creative ideas and creative practices often develop in tandem. The creative ideas emerge through the practitioners’ efforts to address practice problems, through exploration with situational adjustments to regulations or procedures that are
subsequently accepted as valuable alternatives for ongoing practice. Creative practices that employ coordination or collaborative strategies entail more active affirmation as the practitioners persuade partners to join them in departing from established ways of using available resources in their agencies as well as their own.

In the absence of tangible evidence, both of the strategies for generating and adopting creative street-level practices depend on the recognition of the practitioners’ theories-in-use to affirm whether the departures from the program designs constitute improvements as opposed to coping. Some creative practices may also involve evolution of the practitioners’ theories-in-use as they discover more about the environment or learn about the effects of previous creative efforts. Creative practices may also emerge when conditions in the environment challenge the practitioners’ theories in use or make available new resources for devising novel approaches to practice. Opportunities for adopting creative ideas as creative practices may also emerge over time as obstacles to their acceptance and institutionalization change with external events.

**The Practice of Street-Level Creativity:** This attention to the evolution of creative practices and the responsiveness to changes in the environment suggests that creativity is a process in addition to a discrete creative act. Defining creativity as a process has been criticized as too ephemeral to operationalize for systematic research (Amabile 1996) or as tautological for delineating creativity as the process that leads to creative activity (Ford 2000). However, recognizing the temporal dimension of creativity suggests that the opportunity to engage in novel departures from routine ebbs and flows over time, occasionally in creative bursts as problems erupt over time (Drazin et al 1999). The idea of creativity as an iterative and context dependent process affirms the possibility I raised in the critique of the limits of post-Lipsky assessments of how much street-level practitioners can contribute to ongoing program improvement. Creative efforts may not be recognizable immediately and may require that observations be made at the time when the window of opportunity to depart from routines is more widely open.

Moreover, practitioners’ efforts to create value can go wrong and their colleagues’ assessments of the value of their novel ideas may overlook costs or exaggerate gains. Overtime, these mistakes may become apparent or they may nevertheless become rooted in the collective repertoire until intensified practice problems lead the practitioners to question their
assumptions. As James March (2006) acknowledges, even foolish ideas have a place in the creative process, especially when they preserve the energy for future explorations of adaptive intelligence. In this sense, like Rein’s admission that reconstitutive policy myths can revive group solidarity and sense of shared purpose, the practice of street-level creativity can sustain the motivation for its continued pursuit even when it looks a lot like coping.

Echoing Rein’s image of the glove refashioned to fit the hand of practice, March suggests: “Survival may also be served by the heroism of fools and the blindness of true believers. Their imperviousness to feedback is both the despair of adaptive intelligence and, conceivably, its salvation.”

To capture this creative process as well as its potential products, I refer to the practice of street-level creativity as the practitioners’ ongoing effort to develop creative practices. As Drazin and his colleagues emphasize, people must choose to engage in a creative process. Similarly, I conjecture that front-line service workers choose to engage in creative street-level practice. For the creative practice to be seen as a contribution to the system of governance, this choice necessitates an assessment about when departing from established regulations and procedures is likely to be worth the effort. Just as creative street-level practices require validation, so too the choice to engage in creative practice requires consideration about whether the apparent practice problem warrants an alternative to getting the rules right or the pursuit of a more comprehensive solution than doing the right thing with reference to a particular situation. Indeed, it is this intension to seek improvements that differentiations creative practice from coping, even where the difference is blurry in the eyes of those who are not members of the community of practice.

As I will argue in the following chapters, service workers – both as individuals and as groups – make the choice to engage in creative street-level practice when their knowledge from practice affirms that the practice problem is significant and when they sense that they have sufficient resources and influence to address it. This assessment also influences their motivation to engage in the effort of creative practice. The practice of creativity on the front-lines, I argue, depends on the practitioners’ sense that it is feasible to do so given their discretion, their

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15 This is tendency to accept ideas without critically evaluating them in order to preserve current consensus is commonly known as the danger of “groupthink” (Janis 1982).
knowledge about the available resources or latent potential, their capacity to employ the creative strategies for taking advantage of this potential, and their motivation to make the effort to do so.

**Practitioner Discussion Forums as Organizing Structures for Street-level Creativity:**

This preliminary synthesis of my fieldwork and theoretical work has suggested that the practitioner discussion forums foster the practice of street-level creativity. Subsequent chapters will examine more deeply how they serve as venues for learning, mutual support, and collective action. At the same time, I investigate the limitations of the forums. In addition to the aforementioned danger of groupthink, I note where members' knowledge from practice does not translate across organizational and service district boundaries and where conventions of discussion abort learning processes. I also explore the other organization structures some practitioners find to deliberate and work with system partners outside of the community of self-sufficiency practitioners. And through comparisons across the forums and over time, I indicate how – like the individual practitioners – the community of practice also benefits from a balance of autonomy and support.

### 1.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter is a theoretical response to the problem presented in the introduction to the dissertation. There I argued that new ideas about the system of governance mean that street-level service workers are bearing increasing responsibility for making programs work despite the persistence of old ideas about their inclination to fall short of program expectations. In this chapter, I have presented three explanations for this pessimism that lead us to recognize the resources street-level practitioners might employ to participate more actively in the work of governance. This critical review of theories and empirical research about bureaucratic behavior suggests that front-line service workers bring their motivation to serve clients, their knowledge from practice, and their capacity to take advantage of resources in the implementation environment to the tasks of discerning appropriate behavior and improving ongoing practice as well as developing their capacity to do so. I have delineated creative street-level practice as a more feasible variant of innovation and posited the discussion forums of members of the workers' community of practice as venue for deliberation about problems and creative solutions to them.
Redressing the images from popular culture, we can now substitute the stereotype of Bartleby the Scrivener with depictions of practitioners who not only have the will to serve selected clients but also strive to improve ongoing program operations. We can imagine altogether different media reports of caseworkers spurred to seek creative solutions to practice problems by extracting resources from the same set of conditions that make mere survival difficult. And instead of super-heroes we can envision groups of ordinary people who act as a community to further develop one another’s capacity for sustainable creativity and the capacity of collective for farther reaching systemic change. My project seeks to explain how many street-level practitioners strive to meet expectations associated with these more optimistic images of what is feasible for them to contribute to the work of governance.
CHAPTER 2
Challenges of Self-Sufficiency Policy Designs and the Potential for Creative Street-Level Practice

This chapter characterizes the policy context in which I investigate the feasibility of creative street-level practice. The first section describes the two housing-based self-sufficiency programs and situates them in relation to the approach to addressing poverty that is currently the dominant paradigm in social welfare paradigm. The second and most extensive section examines the features of the program designs to identify the challenges of self-sufficiency practice and the potential for creative responses to them. In the final section, I look at recent research on the implementation of similar programs to raise questions about how frontline practitioners might take advantage of this potential to improve self-sufficiency practice and the program designs themselves.

2.1 Self-Sufficiency Programs and the System of Governance Perspective

The Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) and Welfare-to-Work Voucher (WtWV) programs aim to incorporate the goal of promoting economic independence from public assistance into the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) system for delivering housing subsidies to low-income families. I selected these programs for this inquiry into the feasibility of creative street-level practice because – like other programs that aim to promote self-sufficiency among beneficiaries of anti-poverty programs – they are products of the system governance perspective outlined in the introduction. They call upon actors in the domain of federal low-income housing policy to stretch beyond the familiar silo of shelter provision to interact with other system actors. Both programs are designed with flexibility to allow local implementers to be responsive to the contingencies and opportunities in their communities.

The programs also place considerable responsibilities on each of the actors involved. Fulfilling these responsibilities requires the actors to develop their capabilities to do new things. The demands on clients are the most noteworthy. They must engage in the often life-transforming effort of seeking work and pursuing long-term employment goals. It is for this reason that programs in the self-sufficiency paradigm have been characterized as “high expectations programs” (Bardach 1997). Yet housing agencies, their service partners -- and most pertinent to my project – the frontline workers also bear new responsibilities to meet the
expectations of the program designs. In fact, frontline practitioners represent the primary investment of FSS and the WtWV program other than the housing subsidies themselves. In addition to the “people processing” work of determining eligibility for assistance, self-sufficiency work requires frontline practitioners to engage in the more complex endeavor of “people changing” (Prottas 1979; Hasenfeld 1992; Bane and Ellwood 1994).

In this section, I briefly describe the FSS and WtWV programs and position them in relation to other programs in the self-sufficiency paradigm. I then review what we know about how well the program designs and implementing actors are living up to their high expectations in light of the findings from evaluation research.

**The Family Self-Sufficiency Program (FSS):** The FSS program was enacted by Congress in 1990 with the goal of promoting employment and asset development among the low-income residents of HUD operated Housing Choice Voucher Programs (formerly Section 8 vouchers and certificates) and public housing programs. Administered local and regional housing authorities (HAs) nation-wide, the program currently serves more than 75,000 families. Participation in the five to seven year program is voluntary. Those who enroll receive case management services to help them establish employment goals and develop strategies to achieve those goals through accessing education, job training, and supportive services in the community such as child care and transportation assistance and financial literacy education. Program technologies also include an incentive to earn income and build assets in the form of an individual, interest accumulating escrow account linked to HUD’s rent calculation formula. As participants’ earned income increases, the amount they are required to pay towards rent increases accordingly. HAs deposit an amount equal to the increase in rental payments into the escrow accounts which is then made available to program participants upon successful completion of the program. Although there are no formal restrictions, families are expected to use the funds to purchase homes, start a new business, or finance higher education for themselves or their children. HAs may also allow participants to apply for interim withdrawals prior to graduation to finance goal related expenses such as tuition, educational supplies, car repairs, or uniforms.

**The Welfare-to-Work Voucher Program:** The Welfare-to-Work Voucher (WtWV) program was initiated in 1999, to address the lack of stable, affordable housing available to families attempting to transition from welfare to self-sufficiency. HUD awarded 50,000 specially designated housing vouchers to 129 of the HAs who responded to the Request for
Proposals. Administrating agencies were granted considerable flexibility in designing the specific selection criteria, the incentives and work related obligations associated with receipt of the voucher, and other program elements to facilitate the transition from welfare to work. Some programs, including that of the Massachusetts’ Department of Housing and Community Development’s (DHCD) program that is the subject of my research, stipulated that participants must comply with a work requirement in order to retain the housing assistance. JOBLink, as the DHCD program was called, required the heads of household of participating families to work at least 17.5 hours per week or risk termination of the housing assistance. Other programs encouraged employment related activities such as education and training yet did not set thresholds applicable to the entire clientele. In response to Congressional direction, HUD began to phase out the WtWV demonstration program in March of 2004. My research captures the entire period of the program’s operation.

The Self-Sufficiency Paradigm

Another way the FSS and WtWV programs reflect the governance perspective is that they both emerged from experimentation with innovative approaches to promoting economic independence in prior demonstration programs. Project Self-Sufficiency established in 1984 and the subsequent boutique programs, including Project Gateway in Charlotte, North Carolina and the more widely adopted Project Bootstrap formed the basis for FSS to become the first of HUD’s self-sufficiency programs to go to national scale as a mandated program throughout the rental subsidy system (Frees et al 1994; Blomquist et al 1994; Rohe and Kleit 1995, 1997; Bogdon 1999). The WtWV design drew from the experiences of the more recent Moving to Work (MTW) demonstration program that gives HUD and HAs the flexibility to experiment with new approaches for combining housing assistance with incentives for families to work and prepare themselves for work.

This combination of encouraging employment while providing assistance has also emerged across other domains of social welfare policy. The Department of Health and Human Services has made promoting economic independence from public assistance a priority in its programs ranging from the large-scale income support programs for low-income families and its other clientele to the services supported by the Social Services Block grant. Many of the Department

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1 In FY 1999, Congress appropriated $238 M for tenant-based rental assistance to help families make the transition from welfare to work (P.L. 105-276).
of Labor’s workforce development programs have also been part of this self-sufficiency paradigm as are federal and state earned income tax credits. Nonprofit service providers are also increasingly designing programs to meet objectives of self-sufficiency.

Of these, the most recent welfare reform policy – Temporary Assistance to Needy Families – is the most well-known, most comprehensive, and also the most inter-connected with the reforms in the housing arena. In fact, the WtWV program was established in response to the establishment of TANF and was the first housing-based program to require that inter-organizational partnerships be incorporated into formal program designs (Lubell and Sard 1998).

As in the housing domain, the spread of this approach to addressing poverty followed a series of experiments in welfare reform (Mead 1997; Rogers-Dillon 2004; O’Connor 2000). However, the diffusion of the paradigm was less a product of findings from the extensive evaluations of these programs than it was a response to the deeply resonant public philosophy that prioritizes the values and moral principles associated with the work ethic and ideals of personal responsibility and individualism that are so symbolically apparent in the titles of the recent welfare and housing legislation: the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 that resulted in TANF and the Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Action of 1998 in housing. Work is seen as the key source of dignity and self-esteem; obligations are given priority over rights and privileges; and policies that offer beneficiaries a “hand up” to take advantage of work opportunities are preferred to stigmatizing “hand outs” to help families meet basic needs (Handler and Hasenfeld 1991; Schram 1995, 2000; Mead 1997, 2004; Daugherty and Barber 2001).

Along with the paradigm’s widely resonant public philosophy, the operationalization of these ideals in the programmatic ideas of the policy designs facilitated the policymaking process. This combination of a new mode of intervention and new way of envisioning the policy agenda helped to win sufficient bi-partisan support and shift change resistant administrative institutions (Kingdon 1995; Weir 1992; Weaver 2000). Yet the reforms were not without controversy. Although proponents of the paradigm have pointed to evidence of declining welfare rolls and increasing employment rates, others have substantiated claims that some of these gains can be attributed to the opportune economic conditions during the first period of implementation. They

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2 Both of these recent acts contrast with the emphasis on providing the supportive climate for family well-being as well as work in previous landmark legislation: the 1988 Family Support Act in the welfare domain and the 1990 National Affordable Housing Act.
have also identified significant obstacles that have prevented clients from succeeding in meeting the high expectations. Criticisms also concern the fact that programs in self-sufficiency paradigm overlook the structural roots of the causes of poverty and focus instead on poor people's behaviors and attitudes as the target of intervention.

I raise these criticisms again in the discussion of the components of the program designs in the following section. I point to them now to emphasize that the diffusion of the self-sufficiency paradigm was founded more on enthusiasm for the approach than well-substantiated evidence that the design works to achieve the high expectations. The indirect connection between belief in the paradigm and analysis of its impact are particularly pronounced with respect to FSS and the WtWV program. FSS was initiated before the results of the evaluation had been published (Bogdon 1999) and the WtWV program rested on assumptions about the value of housing assistance for furthering workforce participation that had yet to be tested with rigorous research methods, let alone those that produced solid empirical support (Sard and Bogdon 2003, Khadduri, Shroder, & Steffan 2003).

Understanding what we know about the impacts of these programs is nevertheless significant background for assessing what is feasible to expect from the street-level practitioners charged with making them work.

Evidence of Met and Unmet Expectations from FSS and WtWV Evaluations:

At the time I initiated the research for this project, there had been no systematic evaluations of these programs (Bogdon 1999). Since then, HUD commissioned evaluations for each program have been published. The evaluation of FSS indicates that many participants have made progress towards achieving economic self-sufficiency (Ficke and Piesse 2004). Controlling for differences in the age, race and ethnicity, gender, initial earnings levels, geographic distribution, and attrition rates over time, the study found that the median income of program participants increased by 72% (from $6,936 to $11,960) after five years in the program. The corresponding rise in income among a comparison group of non-FSS Section 8 tenants was only half as large, at 36%. Those who successfully reached the personal goals specified in their

contract benefited from the asset building component of the program; the median escrow account disbursement amounted to $3,351 and evaluation team site visits indicate that the funds were primarily used for self-sufficiency purposes such as college tuition and down payments on a home. Although the study did not find significant changes in formal educational attainment, anecdotal evidence from interviews suggests that substantial numbers of participants benefited from job training programs.

The WtWV evaluation did not find such impressive results (Mills et al 2006; Patterson et al 2004). Program participants actually experienced a small yet statistically significant decrease in earnings during the first 5-7 quarters after the random assignment for the study. These small increases disappeared over time and no significant impact on earnings was registered at the 3.5 year follow-up. The study found significant increases rather than decreases in the receipt of public benefits over the study period, a factor attributed to a parallel increase in the number of single-parents among beneficiaries. Nor did the study find any significant treatment-control difference in the amount or type of education and training received. Impacts on poverty and material hardship were more promising and included a substantial reduction in homelessness and household crowding and increased expenditures on food. These increases were particularly pronounced among families with young children. Other impacts on children were mixed or not significant; fewer young children missed school due to health, financial, or disciplinary problems, yet they were less likely to participate in after school activities and there were no effects on other measures of education attainment.

It should be noted, however, that each study had methodological limitations that influenced the validity of the findings. The FSS evaluation study did not employ an experimental design. Consequently, the differences between the FSS participants and the group of non-participants may be due to the participants’ level of motivation to pursue employment rather than the effects of the program. While the WtWV evaluation adopted a rigorous experiment and treatment design, none of the six programs included in the study included work requirements or other more intensive technologies to promote workforce participation. In contrast, like approximately half of the WtWV programs included in a separate consultant’s report, Massachusetts’ program, JOBLink, stipulates work requirements (Quadel 2001). Nor does either study measure the interim goals that are key to the process of pursuing economic independence. Yet another
limitation is that administrative data used for the analysis is known to be flawed as a result of faulty data entry processes in the HAs.\(^4\)

Not only do these studies leave unanswered questions about the extent to which the findings reflect the actual results; they also largely fail to examine how the programs were in fact implemented. As a result, the do not provide a sufficient basis for assessing either whether the program designs work or whether they are workable in practice.

Despite the somewhat ambiguous evidence of program outcomes, enthusiasm for these self-sufficiency programs is widespread. In fact, FSS was launched nationwide before the evaluation of the demonstration program on which it was based was completed. The FSS program continues to be lauded as an opportunity for eligible families that should be expanded to many additional HAs and tenants, in current or elaborated form (Sard 2001, 2003; Fishman et al 2000; Ficke and Piesse 2004; Lubell 2004, Riccio 2007). Despite Congress’ decision to terminate the WtWV program, advocates actively promoted its continued operation (Sard and Strom 2002, Sard and Fischer 2005).

This enthusiasm is also an indication of the impression that anecdotal accounts have made on program advocates. The personal success stories of individual clients resonate with the public and policymakers alike. My interest in these programs, however, is sparked by the stories of the practitioners who are the minds and hands behind the “best practices” featured in award ceremonies and HUD publications. Yet as I argued in the previous chapter, the “best” in that term is a misnomer. What is best in one place is not necessarily best in all places. Moreover the designation is all too often divorced from the actual practice, from the process of creating extraordinary program elements from the mundane regulatory guidelines and limited resources in the program designs. Furthermore, the focus on what is spectacular about a few programs glosses over the practice problems that plague the rest and trigger the efforts to find creative alternatives.

Nor are the contributions of the street-level self-sufficiency practitioners to the client success stories and design of the “best practices” apparent from these accounts. Also missing is the story of the practitioners’ own success stories and struggles. We do not hear how they have contended with the challenges of implementation and the limits of designs to achieve the

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\(^4\) Personal correspondence with Mark Shroder and Robert Gray of HUD’s Policy Development and Research.
recognized successes or the less noticeable incremental steps to get closer to more feasible versions of those expectations.

This dissertation aims to address those questions. To do so, a first take a closer look at the components of the program designs.

2.2 Ambiguity, Conflict, and Uncertainty in the Goals, Technologies, and Management Systems of Self-Sufficiency Designs

Each of the components of policy design I identified in the introduction to Part I establish what the frontline practitioners are expected to achieve, how they are to do so, and with what institutional supports. In addition, they each influence the challenges frontline practitioners face in carrying out their responsibilities. They are also the source of potential resources for addressing the challenges. This section examines what we know about the FSS and WtWV goals, program technologies, and management structures and systems. I supplement this analysis with gleanings from research on other self-sufficiency programs and, in some cases, with some lessons learned in the course of my research.

Challenges and Potential of Ambiguous Goals Based on Narrow Definitions of the Problem

The goals articulated in the designs of both the FSS and the WtWV programs are indicative of the contentious and ambiguous nature of the self-sufficiency paradigm. I describe these attributes in detail because they shape what is expected from the practitioners as well as what they expect from themselves and one another.

Self-Sufficiency Goals in FSS: The official HUD regulations state that the objective of the FSS program is to

"reduce the dependency of low-income families on welfare assistance and on Section 8, public, or any Federal, State, or local rent or homeownership subsidies. Under the FSS program, low-income families are provided opportunities for education, job training, counseling, and other forms of social service assistance, while living in assisted housing, so that they may obtain the education, employment, and business and social skills necessary to achieve self-sufficiency..." (24 CFR Ch. IX (4-1-03 Edition) §984.102).\(^5\)

This emphasis on reducing dependency on public assistance reflects the ambitious objective of all programs in the self-sufficiency paradigm. The instrumental goal of developing

\(^5\) All references to FSS regulations cited in this section refer to this rule – 24CFR Ch. IX). Unless otherwise noted, references are to this April 1, 2003 edition.
participants' capabilities for succeeding in the workforce through a broad range of training and supportive services is common to some programs. In addition, the FSS escrow account aims to promote a longer-term goal of building assets as well as increased income as a means to foster self-sufficiency.

The goal statement also reflects the ambiguity inherent in the authorizing legislation and program regulations. One point of ambiguity concerns what reducing dependency means. In contrast to welfare reform's definitive objective of ending reliance on federal income support, the FSS goal statement's aim of reducing dependency raises questions about what the expected outcome of participation is. Nor is it clear what the instrumental goal of promoting employment entails and the centrality of the longer-term goal of asset-building is not even specified. Finally, the scope of what "self-sufficiency" means as a desired outcome is ambiguous.

Each of these points of ambiguity concern the most contentious aspects of what is feasible for participants to achieve as a result of the self-sufficiency designs. Consequently, they pose challenges to frontline practitioners charged with "getting the rules right" and complicate practitioners' efforts to discern how "do the right thing" for individual clients. Yet the ambiguity also affords space for a range of interpretations of the "self-sufficiency" objective.

Confusing Definitions of "Dependency": A Government Accounting Office briefing report to Congress immediately prior to release of the first round of funding for implementation pointed to the lack of explicit definitions for self-sufficiency and economic independence in the authorizing legislation (GAO April 1992). According to the report, the Act implies that the conditions of self-sufficiency and economic independence are achieved only when the FSS family no longer receives any housing assistance from any source. However, the briefing observes that the regulations do not clearly require HAs to report on how many FSS participants have relinquished housing assistance and what housing alternatives they have found if they have done so. The GAO's recommendation to require such reporting had not been adopted at the time this research was conducted. However, subsequent regulations did clarify that relinquishing housing assistance is not a requirement for successful completion of the program.

In practice, few HAs have included such provisions for relinquishing housing assistance in their administration plans, in part because of the recognition that the cost of housing in many local real estate markets requires income levels in excess of what most families are able to secure without spending considerably more than a third of the household resources on housing. The
evaluation of Operation Bootstrap, the demonstration program that preceded the establishment of FSS, also predicted that requiring participants to abandon housing assistance would significantly reduce the appeal of the program and make recruitment more challenging (Frees et al. 1994, Blomquist et al. 1994, Bogdon 1999).

The FSS regulations have reduced some of the ambiguity by distinguishing between the definition of “self-sufficiency” and the measures of success for individual participants and the program over all. Although the regulations define “self-sufficiency” in terms of public assistance in any form, including housing assistance from any source, they indicate that achievement of self-sufficiency is not a condition for receipt of the FSS escrow account funds (§984.103). Rather, a participant has successfully completed the program when the family has fulfilled all of its obligations under the individual contract and the head of the household has provided certification that “to the best of his or her knowledge and belief, no member of the FSS family is a recipient of welfare assistance” (§984.305(c)).

The definition of “welfare assistance” has also been a source of ambiguity and conflict. Only after the efforts of low-income housing and anti-poverty advocates were the regulations changed so as to allow FSS participants to successful graduate from the program and receive their escrowed funds to continue to receive public support other than cash assistance. The rationale was similar to that of the value of continued housing assistance; help covering the costs of food, healthcare, childcare, and transportation is vital to sustaining employment and supporting a family with low-wage work.

**Ambiguity about “Suitable Employment”**: The official FSS designs are even more ambiguous with respect to the goal of promoting employment and career development. The regulations require participants to “seek and maintain suitable employment” and securing “suitable employment” is among the minimum requirements for successful completion of the program along with independence from cash welfare (§ 984.303(b)(4)). What “suitable employment” entails is purposefully left to the discretion of the HA and the FSS practitioner. According to the regulations, “A determination of suitable employment shall be made by the PHA based on the skills, education, and job training of the individual that has been designated the head of the FSS family, and based on the available job opportunities within the jurisdiction
served by the PHA” (§ 984.303(b)(4)). In fact, the official regulations do not set a minimum period of time participants must be employed to meet the contract requirements.\textsuperscript{6}

The program designs are also clear that maintaining employment in and of itself is not a “sufficient” goal for every participant. For many participants, the goal of acquiring education and experience to pursue more lucrative (or otherwise more gratifying) employment is more appropriate as indicated by the continuation of the statement of objectives cited above:

The Department will measure the success of a local FSS program not only by the number of families who achieve self-sufficiency, but also by the number of FSS families who, as a result of participation in the program, have family members who obtain their first job, or who obtain higher paying jobs; no longer need benefits received under one or more welfare programs; obtain a high school diploma or higher education degree; or accomplish similar goals that will assist the family in obtaining economic independence. (§984.102)

Thus discerning what level and type of employment is “suitable” is within the realm of the FSS practitioners’ discretion. They must assess what is feasible to expect from each client.

\textit{Ambiguity about the Focus of Asset-Building and the Priority of Home Ownership:} The FSS practitioners and their clients also have considerable discretion in delineating objectives for asset-building. In fact, no restrictions dictate how clients can use their escrow funds; once the funds are disbursed upon completion of their self-sufficiency goals, they can spend, save, or invest the money as they desire. HUD and local HA materials suggest that higher education, small business development, home ownership, and future savings are the most desired purposes. However, HUD does not require HAs to follow up with FSS graduates to learn how they used the escrowed savings.

Despite this wide freedom, home ownership is nevertheless a high priority for HUD and the Department has highlighted FSS among the programs that further that objective. At the launch of the program, the HUD Secretary expressed the intention that FSS help low-income families achieve homeownership (GAO 1992). In recent years, FSS programs that demonstrated success in fostering homeownership or who provided extensive homeownership counseling services were awarded preferential status in the allocation of funding for FSS staffing.\textsuperscript{7} However, the

\textsuperscript{6} The primary monitoring form (known as the “50058”) indicates that “full-time employment is 32 hours per week or more, a specification that could imply that this is level of employment that is “suitable.”

\textsuperscript{7} HUD’s Notices of Funding Availability specified these preferences. See “Recommendations for Strengthening HUD’s FSS program” jointly authored by the American Association of Service Coordinators, FSS Partnerships, the Corporation for Enterprise Development, New America Foundation, National Association of Redevelopment
homeownership priority has also been the cause of additional confusion and conflict for FSS practitioners. HUD has frequently changed the priorities for funding, often without substantial prior notice.

The Scope of "Self-Sufficiency": Another source of ambiguity and conflict pertains to the referent of "self" and the meaning of "sufficiency" in the program name. Although the program is called the family self-sufficiency program, all of the regulations indicate the "head of household" as the actor held responsible for meeting the expectations. This focus on the individual beneficiary as distinct from the social connections that influence people's lives and opportunities is consistent with the narrow delineation of the problem of poverty as a consequence of the personal failings rather than those of the social and economic system as a whole.

The emphasis on "personal responsibility" rather than "collective responsibility" also circumscribes a relatively narrow goal (Shlay 1993; Bratt and Keyes 1997, 1998; Daugherty and Barber 2001). In keeping with the individualist perspective, FSS does not call for investments in the communities in which participants reside and seek opportunities for themselves and their children. The focus on the independent self as the objective of policy intervention also eclipses the value people derive from their inter-dependent relationships whether with extended family, friends, and community institutions or actors on behalf of the society as a whole.

This individual-oriented perspective leaves the institutional and other structural factors that influence people's capacity to secure their livelihood within the private labor market outside the realm of the FSS and beyond the scope of many other self-sufficiency programs. Changes in the opportunities for employment with sufficiently high wages to cover the costs of living are beyond the central target of intervention. Self-sufficiency programs do not directly contend with the implications of de-industrialization, the relocation of jobs overseas or from cities to harder to access suburbs, or other causes of declining wages relative to the cost of living. Nor are reversing the legacy of under-investment in educational opportunities within poor communities or the continuing effects of discrimination among the objectives. Such issues are relegated to other interventions in other policy domains.
The goal of “sufficiency” is equally modest. The view that beneficiaries’ insufficient participation in the labor force is the primary problem has led policymakers to define success in terms of declines in the receipt of benefits, increases in employment rates, and gains in wages rather than in the extent to which these achievements satisfy families’ actual needs. In this respect, the term “sufficiency” raises questions about which needs are essential and how to delineate what is essential for each individual and family in light of their unique circumstances and preferences, (Fraser 1989; Bratt and Keyes 1997, 1998). The phrase self-sufficiency can also imply that the individual participant already has acquired sufficient capabilities and has developed a sense of self-efficacy to succeed in the work force (Bratt and Keyes 1997).

In addition, critiques of the focus on employment as the primary objective of social welfare policy have pointed to the underlying assumptions about the value of work outside the home to the work of child raising and family care-giving more generally (Albelda 2001; Haylett 2003; Schram 2000). Nor does the FSS program address how participants might find work that is considered meaningful and gratifying in ways other than the rewards of wages. Moreover, the public discourse on the problem of dependency on public supports that underlies the FSS design is rooted in the notion that dependency erodes poor people’s power, exacerbates racial stereotypes, and thus further undermines beneficiaries’ capacity to compete in the workforce and gain respect in additional domains (Handler and Hasenfeld 1991; Daugherty and Barber 2001; Krushnick and Jennings 1999; Davis 2007). However, the FSS designs do not specifically articulate more holistic objectives of enhancing participants’ sense of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and overall well-being.

Nevertheless, the FSS program does not preclude such dedication to care-giving, cultivating new concepts of self, and developing participants’ capacity to take an active part in shaping their life chances and those of their family and community members. Indeed the intensive case management technology described in the following section may include finding solutions to family oriented challenges among interim objectives. How the practitioners can adapt this technology to developing participants’ sense of self-worth, however, is less apparent.

**Self-Sufficiency Goals in the WtW Program and JOBLink:** The FSS program was a response to the same emergent public philosophy of ending dependence on public assistance and similar ideas about how to foster economic independence that guided welfare reform. FSS and welfare policy are also inter-related in that no longer relying on cash assistance is a key criterion.
for successful completion of the program and in the fact that the FSS target population includes — yet is certainly not limited to — current and former welfare recipients. However, as I explicated above, the goals of FSS are considerably more comprehensive than those of welfare policy, even in the more robust version of the 1988 Family Support Act. In contrast, because the WtWV program was a direct response to the 1996 welfare reform legislation, it aimed to reinforce and support welfare policy’s provisions for encouraging workforce participation. Consequently, the goals of the WtWV program were more narrowly circumscribed than those of FSS.

The WtWV program aimed to complement the welfare reform’s goal of promoting employment in two respects.8 It sought to compensate for the limitations of TANF by providing supports to help welfare recipients make the transition from income support and it aimed to further support the transition to work.

**Assistance to Cushion the Transition to Work Dependency:** The housing assistance extended to WtWV participants was recognition that securing employment is often not sufficient to support a family once they have reached the time limits for cash assistance. DHCD’s response to HUD’s Request for Proposals for participation in the demonstration program emphasized the high cost of housing in the state in relation to anticipated earnings of low-wage workers. The proposal presented scenarios of that showed that households who work full time at minimum wage will have to pay a considerable portion of that income on housing, with a range from 71% in Springfield to as high as 100% in Boston. Even at $10 an hour, the scenarios show that Boston residents face a rent burden of 52% of the household income and the burden is higher than 30% in all of the other state districts. The proposal cited the state welfare department’s statistics on welfare leavers as evidence that these scenarios indeed reflect the circumstances of welfare leavers.9 It also referred to statistics from other state research and anecdotal accounts from service providers that Massachusetts’ welfare leavers were experiencing higher rates of homelessness and housing instability at the time the proposal was submitted.

**Promoting Workforce Participation:** The program’s second goal was to supplement TANF’s workforce promotion objectives by providing additional encouragement and supports

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8 Although none of these goals are explicitly stated in HUD’s official regulations, they are implicit in the directives to HAs for submitting applications for funding and in the guidance to evaluators of the program (Patterson et. al 2004).

9 The DHCD analysis of the DTA data shows that the average family in Boston spends 65% of its income on rent assuming that rent is equivalent to the published fair market rent for the corresponding household size and that in all but a few instances, the rent burden is estimated at well over 50% of the household income.
for finding and maintaining employment. In this sense, providing housing assistance was both the program's goal and its core technology for promoting employment. The idea of providing housing assistance as a means to foster employment was based on the rationale that housing security stabilizes the household budget and housing situation and thereby reduces stress and improves the family members' sense of control and ability to plan, and consequently, increases their capacity to engage in job search, work efforts, and advancement to more demanding and higher paying jobs (Shlay 1993; Bratt 2002; Newan and Harkness 2002; Patterson et. al 2004; Sard and Lubel 2000; Sard 2003). The portability of the voucher was also seen as facilitating relocation to take advantage of work opportunities in different locations.

In recognition that seeking and maintaining employment is often an ongoing process for former welfare recipients and that they may never earn sufficient wages to afford private market housing, the housing assistance is not time limited as is the income support of TANF. WtWV participants are able to retain the housing assistance for as long as they remain income-eligible under the regulations for regular federal housing vouchers.

Some WtWV demonstration programs adopted the additional goal of encouraging participants to find and seek employment to supplement the TANF provisions and the efforts of local welfare offices and welfare-to-work programs. DHCD’s JOBLink program design is among those with the greatest emphasis on promoting workforce participation. DHCD’s proposal to HUD stated that its goal is to “reward employment and support job enrichment.” JOBLink operationalizes this commitment to employment by setting a goal that all participants must work at least 17.5 hours a week or make a “good faith effort” towards that end.

As a state sponsored program in a Massachusetts where the TANF program has one of the most extensive work requirements and restrictive time limits, it is perhaps not surprising that JOBLink does not interpret “supporting job enrichment” to include encouraging education and training or attending to family obligations. Nor does the JOBLink program aim to develop job opportunities or extend job training and other supportive services currently available to Massachusetts residents. Rather, the assumption is that existing resources are sufficient to support work. To support this rationale, the proposal contended that with an unemployment rate of only 2.8%, work is plentiful and that jobs are available in diverse fields including the relatively lucrative areas of health care and other service sector jobs.
Challenges and Potential for Meeting the Expectations: As in FSS, JOBLink practitioners face the challenge of helping their clients meet the program’s high expectations with designs that are based on a relatively limited conception of the obstacles to climbing out of poverty. In one respect, JOBLink goals are easier to achieve. JOBLink participants need only meet the minimal hours of employment; they need not actually achieve -- or even pursue -- career development or asset-building goals. And by virtue of the eligibility rules, all JOBLink participants have already or will soon cease to rely on cash assistance.

For the practitioners, however, achieving JOBLink’s less extensive goals is more challenging in that there is relatively little room for reinterpreting the program’s goal to accommodate differences in clients’ capabilities and circumstances or the practitioners’ perspectives on what achieving self-sufficiency means. The work requirement is unambiguous; 17.5 hours of work is easily understood, even if documenting it is challenging. The only leeway JOBLink practitioners have is their interpretation of what making a “good faith effort” to satisfy the requirement entails.

Challenges and Potential of “People Changing” Technologies

The self-sufficiency designs combine three primary technologies of intervention, each of which aims to address the narrowly delineated problem of dependency and the correspondingly narrow objective of encouraging beneficiaries of assistance to increase their participation in work related activities. Each technology is grounded in a different theory about what motivates people’s behaviors and preferences. Each also requires a particular set of demands for practical judgment on the part of the front-line worker charged with encouraging the clients to adopt the new behaviors.  

After characterizing the theories underlying each of these technologies, I specify how they are featured in the FSS and WtWV (and JOBLink) program designs. I raise questions about two types of practice problems practitioners are likely to encounter in employing these technologies to meet program expectations: those stemming from conditions in the implementation.

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10 This descriptive taxonomy of theories is loosely based on Bane and Ellwood’s (1994) characterization of three models for explaining dependency. I have added the relation to the technologies of the self-sufficiency designs. I discuss to what they term “expectancy theory” and the cultural or values focused models in relation to the paternalist technologies of contracts and service referrals. I introduce the “maternalist” variation of this approach in the third subsection on more personalized, intensive case management or coaching. See their discussion for comprehensive references to the empirical evidence for these models up through the publication date.
environment that curtail following the directives and those that derive from the inadequacy of the technologies to produce the intended results. I also point to the potential resources practitioners might use for designing creative solutions to these problems. The key questions about street-level capacity relative to these program technologies are thus: Can they use them? Do they work? What resources do they have to make them work better?

Incentives and Sanctions: The idea that unconditional public assistance discourages beneficiaries from pursuing work as a source of income is among the most commonly voiced critiques of traditional approaches to poverty alleviation. According to this theory, relying on assistance is a rational response to limited options. When the option is low-paid work with few other benefits, little security, and numerous associated aggravations or receiving a similar income with no need to labor for others’ gains and without the need to find childcare and transportation, relying on welfare is a rational choice (Bane and Ellwood 1994; Mead 2000; Blank and Haskin 2001; Danziger et al 2002). Self-sufficiency programs aim to counteract this “perverse incentive” – as this phenomenon is commonly termed – by introducing incentives and sanctions to modify the trade-offs between working and relying on assistance. In David Ellwood’s terms popularized in the Clinton administration, the objective of this technology is to “make work pay.”

In JOBLink (like TANF) incentives and sanctions are the primary mode of intervention. The incentive to work is the housing assistance itself. Applicants are eligible for the JOBLink housing vouchers only if they make a commitment to work the requisite 17.5 hours a week. The sanction is the termination of housing assistance for failing to comply with the work requirement. In FSS, the promise of the escrow account provides the incentive to pursue employment or more lucrative employment than the Section 8 tenant earned prior to enrollment in the program. As the FSS participant’s final year in the program approaches, the threat of losing entitlement to the escrow account for failing to meet the contractual obligations is a form of sanction, although it entails the forfeit of an as yet unobtained benefit rather than the loss of an existing one.

Applying these technologies requires determining eligibility and monitoring compliance. Both of these tasks rely mostly on factual knowledge about the program regulations and clients’ employment (JOBLink) or earnings (FSS) activities. Obtaining the requisite information to assess eligibility and compliance requires effective communication with clients, and sometimes
other system actors with the authority to validate the validity of clients’ claims. These two tasks are similar to the primary modes of operation in regular Section 8 administration. The additional complexity of documentation requirements and processing that information makes the tasks somewhat more challenging for the self-sufficiency practitioners than their Section 8 counterparts, yet the routines are familiar.

Making exceptions to take into account individual client’s circumstances and abilities, however, is an aspect of this technology that relies on the practitioners’ ability to combine their different sources of knowledge to make sound judgments about what is appropriate. This task is less essential to typical Section 8 monitoring, although managing conflicts between tenants and property owners draws on similar communication and negotiation skills. This obligation to “do the right thing” for clients is particularly challenging for JOBLink practitioners who, as stated above, have little guidance from the regulations about what constitutes a “good faith effort” to comply with the work requirements. Moreover the stakes of getting it wrong are high. Terminating assistance for failure to comply means that the family may face eviction and granting assistance to someone who is not working is unfair to the many eligible applicants still on the waiting list. FSS practitioners face comparatively less pressure because the self-sufficiency goals are determined relative to each participant’s abilities and circumstances.

These challenges are a source of potential practice problems of the first type – those that emerge as the practitioners attempt to carry out directives stipulated in the program designs. Thus questions about the feasibility of street-level creativity concern how the practitioners might use their knowledge from practice and relationships with clients and other system actors to develop novel techniques for improving documentation, communication, and processing procedures.

Critiques of incentives and sanctions as a means to change people’s behavior surface potential practice problems of the second type where the designs are poorly matched to the actual social problem and implementation environment. One critique concerns the assumption that job opportunities are plentiful and clients’ motivation to work is sufficient to lead to employment. However, research on welfare reform has raised doubts whether about this assumption holds when unemployment is high and program participants must compete with those with more work experience and skills for scarce jobs (Cancian 2001; Wood, Moore, & Rangarajan 2008; Herbst 2008). Nor do such rapid workforce attachment – or “work-first” -- approaches to encouraging
employment help participants acquire the requisite skills for obtaining employment (Michalopolis & Berlin 2001; Pavetti & Bloom 2001). Another critique is that standardized incentives and sanctions do not take into account the obstacles to working that clients face to fulfill the expectations or strive to do so (Corcoran et al 2000; Danziger, Kalil, & Anderson 2000; Blumenberg 2002; Lee & Vinokur 2007). Moreover, the idea of incentives and sanctions rests on the conception of motivation as a discrete event based on an isolated shift of preferences rather than an ongoing process of committing and recommitting to the pursuit of specific goals (Stellmack et. al. 2003).

These last three critiques are most relevant to JOBLink. In contrast, the incentive of the FSS escrow account is proportional to each client’s earnings and the process of accumulating the funds extends over the entire five-year period of participation. Nor do FSS clients necessarily forfeit the funds if they face obstacles along the way as long as they are able to meet the minimal requirements by the end of their participation period. Moreover, the FSS design emphasizes additional technologies for encouraging training and education and addressing barriers to employment discussed in the following sections.

These limitations of the technology of incentives and sanctions present opportunities for creative practice if practitioners are able to alter the technologies themselves.

**Personal Contracts and Individualized Service Plans:** Another theory underlying the self-sufficiency interventions is the idea that poor people need more than better choices to make appropriate decisions about how they live their lives; they also need more supervision to direct them to pursue behaviors that will improve life chances. The “new paternalism,” as Lawrence Mead (1997) has termed this approach to promoting employment, substitutes obligations for the focus on beneficiaries’ rights or basic needs that underlie traditional programs. The individual contracts of participation that characterize this approach are key elements of both FSS and JOBLink. The contracts bind participants to commitments to engage in the required employment related activities even if they are inclined to do otherwise. JOBLink contracts stipulate standardized obligations including the minimum hours to be devoted to work or work related activities, terms for disabilities and maternity leave. The FSS contract of participation also includes some standard obligations such as the obligation to maintain “suitable employment” and the requirement of not having received welfare assistance for twelve months prior to graduation.
In contrast to the JOBLink standardized contracts, the FSS contract of participation is individualized. In addition to clarifying the minimal requirements for graduation, FSS contracts delineate goals that are specific to each participant's abilities and employment objectives. This approach to promoting self-sufficiency is less about "people changing" than it is about changing their behaviors or, more precisely, encouraging them to adopt new sets of behaviors that are more likely to lead to the desired outcomes. Whereas the theory of motivation underlying incentives and sanctions assumes that motivation is a stable character trait and the way to alter people's behavior is to shift the expectations about what they stand to gain if they do, the theory underlying the individualized plans assumes that motivation can be cultivated and doing so requires facilitating the effort exerted towards achieving goals.

The more personalized FSS contract and Individual Training and Service Plans (ITSPs) that accompany them aim to facilitate effort by setting goals that are feasible for each client to achieve, helping them attain the skills to make their efforts more effective, and attending to the environmental factors that influence their performance. Thus FSS entails "doing the right thing" for each client by design. Assuming this responsibility requires assessment skills that self-sufficiency practitioners are not always trained to perform. Even if they do have some background in social work—not a requirement specified in the regulations—they are not specialists in career counseling, mental health diagnosis, or discerning whether their clients suffer from learning disabilities, addictions, or domestic violence. Therefore, acquiring these skills or designing techniques and instruments to make the assessments and appropriate plans without those skills is another invitation for creative practice.

To facilitate the fulfillment of these plans, the FSS designs call for practitioners to refer each client to specific services in the community. This component is considered essential because of the assumption that poor people often lack information about available opportunities in addition to the motivation to pursue them. Case management also aims to compensate for the disjointedness of the service delivery system in which each provider operates with different, and frequently changing, eligibility requirements and application procedures. In a sense, case

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11 Psychologists characterize the first as "goal commitment" and the second as "achievement" or "expectations" centered theories of motivation. Whereas "achievement motivation" focuses on the anticipated result of having chosen to perform the desired behavior, goal commitment theory stresses the processes involved in making the effort to do so. According to goal commitment theory, goals affect behavior by directing attention to the desired task, mobilizing on-task effort, encouraging task persistence over time, and facilitating the development of strategies to accomplish the task (Locke & Latham 1990, Kanfer 1990). To date, policy analysts have paid little attention to the difference between these understandings of the process of motivation (Stelmack et al 2003).
management is intended as a substitute for the social networks and role models assumed to advantage those who reside in communities where working families are the majority.

Referrals to services require familiarity with the existing providers and their eligibility requirements throughout the service delivery system. Indeed, according to the FSS regulations, “If a social service agency fails to deliver the supportive services pledged under an FSS family member’s individual training and services plan, the PHA shall make a good faith effort to obtain these services from another agency.” (984.303 e(1)). Yet the regulations are not entirely clear about what constitutes a “good faith effort.” Nor do they explicate the relation between concerted effort to connect the clients to the services and the clients’ use of those services or between the use of the services and the extent to which they are likely to benefit from it. In fact, evidence from studies of welfare to work programs point to the inadequacy of funding for services, inaccessibility of some services for those who lack adequate transportation, and poor service quality (Corcoran et al 2000; Danziger, Kalil, & Anderson 2000; Blumenberg 2002; Lee & Vinokur 2007).

While knowledge about the service delivery system is not in itself sufficient to compensate for the inadequacy of the available resources, this knowledge and the personal relationships practitioners forge with providers in other organizations constitute “latent potential” for creative street-level practice. My research explores how FSS practitioners make a “good faith effort” to use this potential to change partners’ routines and develop new ways of working together across programmatic boundaries to help their clients navigate the fragmented system of existing services and to augment the resources available to them.

**Intensive Case Management and Coaching:** The contested moral status of paternalist policies is among the chief criticisms (Hasenfeld 2000, Bardach 1997, Schram 2000). This recognition leads Eugene Bardach (1997) to advocate for “persuasive paternalism” that emphasizes counseling or coaching and instruction in addition to goal setting, strategizing, and service referral. This more intensive interaction between staff and clients aims to break down the divide between the state-agent and citizen-agent roles by allowing all of these actors to come to an understanding of what is appropriate and desirable.

At least theoretically, persuasion can be done with respect for the clients’ own preferences and priorities to emphasize their self-actualization in addition to promoting the value of work.
The tenets of social-cognitive theories of motivation support the feasibility of this objective. Strengthening individuals' beliefs in their capabilities is understood to be as critical to motivation as identifying the desirability of the expected outcomes of those efforts (Bandura 1982). Also key are opportunities for learning, both acquiring the necessary skills and receiving constructive evaluation and feedback to improve performance and, when necessary, to adjust goals to fit the individual's capabilities (Kanfer 1990). Successful motivation, according to this view, also requires fostering participants' intrinsic motivation to pursue the desired behavior, an effort that requires translating performance directives into personally meaningful allocations of effort (Kanfer 1990).

This conception of case management is certainly compatible with the FSS design's stated objectives and its five to seven year time frame. However, program guidelines for designing the contracts and plans do not explicate only the clients' obligations and say nothing about the practitioners' responsibilities to the client. Accurate needs assessments and effective plans require the relational knowledge obtained through trusting relationships with clients. Practitioners who have established good rapport with their clients are likely to be more successful in encouraging the desired work behaviors while talking clients' own values and priorities into account (Sansone 1998). Yet achieving that trust in the FSS context is challenging in light of the legacy of punitive relationships between housing and welfare agencies and clients. The inherent imbalance of the contractual obligations also impedes the kinds of relational contracts known to promote genuine transformations (Schön 1982; Schram 2000; Soss 2002). The challenge for meeting these expectations is whether the FSS practitioners can acquire the tools and the requisite skills for using them.

Developing clients' sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy to help them pursue careers that are personally satisfying as well as financial remunerative is another aspect of this technology. Doing so poses an even more challenging task of helping clients access what they need without undermining efforts to convince them of their ability to do succeed on their own.12 In the words of several of the FSS practitioners interviewed in my research, these practices involve "mothering." In this sense, self-sufficiency technology can have more in common with maternalism than paternalism. Practitioners may strive to care for their clients rather than

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12 In the social work vernacular, this distinction is commonly expressed as the tension between "enabling" and "empowering" (Dunst, Trivette, and Angela (1994).
merely manage or serve them; they may assist them in meeting their basic needs, facilitate their growth, and guide them to acceptable pursuits (Noddings 2000; Ruddick 1995).

Discerning the appropriate boundaries between personal and professional relationships in this effort is challenging even for those with training in clinical psychology and social work. Thus for the FSS practitioners who lack such training, this is an additional source of practice problems and frustration. My observations of the FSS forums examine how the practitioners develop their theories-in-use to guide the development of practice to help clients grow and inspire them to keep on trying when their motivation flags.

Management Systems and Organizing Structures for Self-Sufficiency Practice

Management systems and structures are especially significant in self-sufficiency programs because the extensive flexibility granted to local agencies and the considerable discretion awarded to street-level practitioners mean that the policymaking process continues into the implementation phase by design. The fact that street-level workers’ efforts comprise the primary investment of the interventions also means that much of the policy designs are completed at the front-lines, with the guidance and supports that the local management systems and organizing structures provide.

Management is also particularly consequential for self-sufficiency programs because of the propensity for practice problems discussed thus far in this chapter. The narrow theory of the problem underlying the program designs, the conflict and ambiguity surrounding the goal of self-sufficiency and its definition, and the limitations of the program technologies for motivating clients to work mean that frontline practitioners need the guidance and support for discerning appropriate courses of action. They need mechanisms for communicating and coordinating with other system actors. And they need to acquire the knowledge and skills to be more effective in self-sufficiency work and the creative practice of improving program operations.

This section addresses each of these challenges and assesses the management structures and systems of the self-sufficiency designs promise capacity to facilitate efforts to address them. The analysis draws from research on the implementation of other self-sufficiency programs in addition to the FSS and JOBLink designs themselves. In a few cases, I draw from observations from my own study.
Lack of Mechanisms to Motivate Agencies and Street-Level Practitioners: Whereas TANF introduced performance measurements linked to budget streams to encourage local agencies to reduce welfare rolls and to prompt innovative ideas for doing so, the self-sufficiency programs in the housing system have provided few such incentives. Not until several years into the implementation of FSS did HUD introduce the Section 8 Management Assessment Program (SEMAP) scores for evaluating performance of agencies’ Section 8 programs. That scoring system includes two measures for evaluating FSS: the number of participants enrolled in the program relative to the agency’s minimum program size and the percentage of participants with a positive balance in their escrow accounts. These measures account for 7.4% of the maximum total score, a meaningful, yet not substantial push to excel.

In fact, many HAs resisted the federal directive to offer the program because they viewed the self-sufficiency agenda as outside their core mission of providing affordable housing and because they considered FSS to be an “unfunded mandate” (Sard 2001). Even when HUD expanded funding for program staff to include smaller agencies and funding for more than one staff person for agencies with larger required program sizes, the sense that the program was not adequately supported persisted.

In contrast to FSS, performance incentives for the WtWV program were a function of the competitive funding for participation in the demonstration. HAs who won the contract gained administration fees for each client effectively enrolled and the prospects of grant renewal would have compelled agencies to make an effort to evidence implementation success, were the program to have continued. Agencies receive no additional administrative fees for FSS participants since they are already recipients of the fee-accruing housing voucher. The WtWV vouchers were particularly attractive to HAs given that they represented the first new housing vouchers authorized in the five years prior to the establishment of the program. Some agencies may have shared HUD’s and some influential Congressional committee members’ ambitions to join into the self-sufficiency agenda. However, concerns about the impact of welfare reform on tenants’ ability to pay their rent and utility bills were probably more influential (Sard and Bogdon 2003; Khadduri, Shroder & Steffen 2003).

The program designs provide even fewer incentives to the front-line workers than they do the housing agencies. Self-sufficiency workers receive slightly higher salaries for FSS and WtWV work than for regular Section 8 workers in many HAs. Yet they do not receive bonuses
for good performance. On the contrary, my observations and interviews suggest that proficient workers are often acknowledged with the reward of additional obligations, often those that are unrelated to self-sufficiency work. Moreover, the fact that HUD funding allocations for FSS are not directly based on the minimum program size, practitioners are often forced to manage caseloads that are considerably larger than the recommended 50 per worker. Indeed, the burden of high caseloads has been among the factors attributed to the lower than anticipated outcome measures (Rohe and Kleit 1997, 1999). Reinforcing this finding, a study of three large-scale multi-site random assignment experiments in the context of mandatory welfare-to-work programs found that high caseloads had substantial effects on earnings (Bloom et al 2003).

Given the absence of external rewards, self-sufficiency practitioners must rely on intrinsic motivation to sustain their efforts to serve clients and improve program operations. However, limited systems for tracking clients’ progress compromises the practitioners’ capacity to acknowledge their achievements and convey their accomplishments to others. The tracking system is a poor source for self-evaluation, however, for two reasons. The system is designed to portray a point-in-time portrait of the tenant portfolio for reasons related to Section 8 administration; the lack of historical records precludes direct trend analysis of any kind. This limitation is particularly salient given that clients’ achievements are rarely linear; program participants move in and out of employment and through different jobs and educational programs as they pursue their goals and confront emerging life challenges. Secondly, the data entry process, as it is divided among the self-sufficiency workers and the regular Section 8 staff, is so prone to errors that HUD’s own reports based on the data include caveats regarding its accuracy (Shroder 2003). Moreover, my observations indicate that agencies’ internal MIS policies

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13 Salaries vary by agency and are to be set in relation to comparable roles in the agency’s service jurisdiction. My interviews with FSS and JOBLink practitioners and Rental Assistance directors in Massachusetts suggest that many agencies are constrained by internal salary scales and cannot offer significantly higher salaries for FSS practitioners even if they have substantial previous experience or demonstrate stellar abilities.

14 This figure appears in the HUD Notice of Funding Availability as a general guideline for what constitutes a full-time position. Because minimum sizes were established in relation to the number of new vouchers the agency received in 1991 (and then additional allocations until 1998), some agencies have required minimum sizes that are many times greater than 50. HUD records indicate that no agencies receive funding for more than two full-time positions regardless of caseloads (Sard 2001).
prohibit self-sufficiency practitioners from installing and operating alternative programs that might be used to track client data in those cases where they have the skills to do so.\(^15\)

**Communication and Coordination Structures for Facilitating Routines and Relationships:** In the previous chapter, I argued that disconnected and contentious communication curtails street-level practitioners’ capacity to legitimize their use of discretion and exercise the strategies of creative practice. Despite the expectations for local innovation, the number of actors involved in the intervention, and the need for clarification of ambiguous directives, the self-sufficiency designs have established only a limited number of new organizing structures for communication and coordination. These pertain to the interactions along the institutional hierarchy, across departments within the housing agencies, among actors in the service delivery system, and with clients and their advocates.

**Communication Between Management and the Front-Lines (The Institutional Hierarchy):** Among the key communication challenges is the transmission of clear programmatic goals along the hierarchy from state decision makers, to local managers, and on to front-line workers. Indeed, the problem of managing goal ambiguity and conflict is among the most prominent findings of recent research on welfare reform implementation (Meyers et al 1998; Meyers et al 2001; Lurie and Riccucci 2003; Riccucci 2002, 2005a,b; Riccucci et al 2004). This research finds that the mixed messages the practitioners receive together with their own beliefs about what is right and perceptions of what works exacerbates their tendency to resort to coping rather than contribute to improving programs.

To contend with the complexity of the housing-based self-sufficiency programs, DHCD established a new position to facilitate direct communication with the line staff for the purposes of clarifying objectives and procedures for pursuing them as well as for making adjustments to program regulations in light of developments in the implementation process. Shortly after receiving the WtWV grant, DHCD hired a state level representative to monitor and advise both JOBLink and FSS. They chose Leslie Gleason who had been one of the first FSS coordinators in the state and was well known to the FSS practitioners in each of the nonprofit agencies. Not only was Leslie available to answer questions, she also made a point of attending the JOBLink practitioner discussion forum meetings upon invitation and when new directives or other

\(^{15}\) The experiences of one of the agencies in my study are both exceptions and proof of the challenges. One MIS overhaul resulted in the dismantling of the FSS tracking system devised by MIT students. A subsequent MIS decision led the staff designed JOBLink tracking system to be disbanded as well.
information was transmitted from HUD. This practice of participating in forum discussions spread to FSS where she served more as an experienced advisor and program advocate than a monitor. As the stories conveyed in the following chapters will elaborate, Leslie also served as a mediator between the self-sufficiency practitioners and DHCD and also, to a certain extent, as a broker with agency directors or supervisors.

*Communication and Cooperation Across Agency Departments:* The division of labor and coordination between those who perform the essential “people processing” work of determining eligibility for assistance and compliance with requirements and those who do the “people changing” work of the self-sufficiency technologies has been noted as a key challenge of self-sufficiency practice (Holcolmb et al 1998; Riccucci 2005b). The housing-based self-sufficiency programs adopt the approach of a clear division of labor between the self-sufficiency workers and the regular staff responsible for the HA’s core tasks of determining eligibility for housing assistance, ensuring that the housing meets quality standards, and enforcing tenants’ compliance with occupancy rules. This division of labor not only frees the self-sufficiency workers to concentrate on program goals; it also serves to distinguish them from the regular staff who are often perceived as punitive landlords rather than allies for personal growth (Collins et al 2005; Zaterman 2003).

However, the experience of the JobsPlus demonstration program in public housing developments demonstrates the additional challenge of asymmetrical interdependency between the self-sufficiency staff and their co-workers in other HA departments. The self-sufficiency workers needed assistance from the regular public housing staff to inform tenants about the program, to explain how the financial incentives operate, and to make sure that the incentives are calculated appropriately (Kato 2003). The MDRC evaluation of the program found that the active support of the Executive Director and top management was essential to fostering cooperation across departments.

Even where such support was prevalent, the interactions proved challenging. As one observer expressed the challenge:

> Across sites, JobsPlus was constantly walking a tightrope in an effort, on the one hand, to cooperate with the management office without being labeled an arm of the housing authority and, on the other hand, to build credibility with the residents without taking on an advocacy role for their grievances against the housing authority. (Kato 2003: 113–4).
FSS and JOBLink workers’ reliance on regular Section 8 staff is even more significant than the place-based self-sufficiency programs. Unlike JobsPlus, the voucher-based self-sufficiency programs are not able to interact with tenants informally as they encounter them on the development site. Nor do FSS and JOBLink include the resident participation component of JobsPlus in which resident leaders were paid to mobilize interest among tenants and communicate between staff and tenants.

Inter-Organizational Communication and Coordination: The self-sufficiency designs are based on the idea that actors throughout the workforce development social service delivery systems are interdependent. Even where service referrals and coordination are not required program elements – as in JOBLink – the assumption is that clients can and will take advantage of employment and service opportunities within their communities and that employers and service providers will hire and serve them. Indeed, the potential for mutual gain from such interactions is among the guiding assumptions of work-first strategies.

Developing productive relationships with service providers in the community is critical to the FSS case management technology and among the required components of the FSS practitioners’ official role. Marcia Meyers (1993) hypothesizes that frontline staff are less likely to work cooperatively with other organizations when the mandate to coordinate lacks specificity, monitoring or enforcement tools; where frontline staff are given additional work without additional time, authority or resources; when they have substantial discretion yet few incentives to work cooperatively with other providers; when staff work largely in isolation from other providers in the service network; and where expectations communicated by agency managers conflict with coordination activities.

Virtually all of these conditions characterize typical work environments of FSS coordinators and the directive to apply “good faith effort” towards making the existing social service delivery system work for their clients despite its deficiencies and their own lack of resources and influence. Further constraining their bargaining power, FSS practitioners have no service funding to entice potential partners to coordinate. Unlike their counterparts in the WtWV program or the earlier voucher-based self-sufficiency programs, they are not able to offer housing assistance to the clients of potential partners. And unlike self-sufficiency programs that operate in public housing developments, FSS practitioners in Section 8 agencies cannot contribute facilitates such as computer learning centers, classroom space, or other chances to
offer services in close proximity to their clientele’s residences as a means to enhance accessibility and utilization. Finally, even where HA directors support the self-sufficiency agenda, because of the legacy of isolation, few HAs have developed working relationships with other providers and in some communities, long wait lists and tenants’ complaints have already eroded the sense of trust that is vital to establishing interorganizational connections.

In addition to these barriers, studies of street-level coordination in the context of welfare reform and workforce development have found resistance to working together even when each partner was mandated to do so or were likely to receive concrete benefits from doing so (Pindus et al 2000, Sandfort 1999, Corbett et al 2003, Ragan 2003). These studies found that coordination among front-line workers in different types of self-sufficiency organizations was especially difficult when partners adopted conflicting conceptions of what self-sufficiency entails and how to achieve it. Even when providers shared a work-first or human capital investment approach, different performance standards, and procedural requirements, such as time lines and demands for documentation, thwarted cooperation. Turf barriers, concerns about client confidentiality, incompatible service boundaries, and complex eligibility requirements also hindered efforts to work together. Self-sufficiency workers also resist coordination when different values and norms of what good service entails inhibits the development of trusting relationships across organizational boundaries (Sandfort 1999; Corbett et al 2005; Corbett and Noyes 2003).

The FSS design does not directly counteract any of these challenges. However the regulations do stipulate an organizing structure to facilitate interorganizational coordination. The FSS design calls upon self-sufficiency workers to establish a Program Coordinating Committee (PCC) to assist practitioners in learning about available services and resources and for the purposes of coordination to enhance client’s accessibility to available services and, where feasible, to improve the services themselves. Suggested committee membership includes officials from welfare offices, workforce development providers, other employment services, child-care providers, local government representatives and other private, public; and nonprofit service providers who can help the FSS practitioners fulfill their obligation to meet the services needs of each client.

William Rohe and Rachel Garshick Kleit’s survey of over 500 FSS programs found that virtually all had established active PCCs with broad membership and a wide range of activities
including actual service provision, developing new services, raising funds, and promoting the program in the community (1999). However, my observations in Massachusetts suggest that many PCCs have disbanded or are no longer as active as they were in the fall and summer of 1996 when this survey was conducted. During the time of my research, only two of the eight regional nonprofits were engaged with active PCCs (although many still had nominal ones on the books). Discussions with the practitioners revealed that service partners were highly interested in meeting at the time that the PRWORA was beginning to take effect, precisely the time of Rohe and Kleit’s survey. Yet after the period of enormous changes in regulations and resource availability had been replaced by routine operations, PCC participation diminished. Some FSS practitioners found other forums to join that did not require them to assume full responsibility for convening the meetings.

Because the JOBLink program design does not include referrals to other service providers, the need to coordinate with partners outside of the housing agencies is less critical than it is in FSS. Nevertheless, the practitioners had access to high level decision makers in other service domains through the JOBLink Steering Committee DHCD established to comply with the requirements of the WtWV program. Committee members included representatives from the state welfare department, DTA, the director of the trade association of the One Stop Career Centers established by the Workforce Investment Act, and Rental Assistance directors from the MNPHA agencies in addition to DHCD staff. The JOBLink line staff were generally included in the Committee’s quarterly meetings. The Steering Committee’s role was to elicit information guidance from program partners about the impact of developments in the welfare and workforce policy domains and to authorize decisions presented by DHCD staff.

Opportunities for Communicating with Clients and Their Advocates: Relationships between the practitioners and their clients are perhaps the most critical for self-sufficiency practice. Each of the technologies of intervention requires extensive communication between practitioners and their clients. The FSS and JOBLink designs establish what is expected from those interactions, yet they do not specify how to make that communication effective. They do not provide guidelines for resolving tensions between the practitioners’ roles as state-agents and client-agents as they emerge in discussions with clients. Nor do they indicate what practitioners should do when communications break down.
Nevertheless, the regular Section 8 program, offers self-sufficiency practitioners a large repertoire of recognized routines from which to construct novel approaches to self-sufficiency work that appear familiar to colleagues elsewhere in the agency. In addition to the formal interactions noted above – the intake, issuance, lease-up, recertification, and relocation procedures – the Section 8 repertoire also includes formal client conferences and hearings and tenant-mediation services for adjudicating disagreements and resolving conflicts. Regular mailings to tenants and briefings are means to communicate new information to groups of tenants as are agency brochures and newsletters.

In addition to these opportunities for enhancing communication from the practitioners and the HAs to the clients, the established repertoire of procedures also includes a mechanism for obtaining feedback from clients about ongoing HA operations. Among the provisions of the 1998 QHWRA Act is the codification of HA’s obligation to establish a Resident Advisory Board (RAB) charged with making recommendations in the development of the required annual and five year PHA plan. The 1998 Act also explicitly requires these plans to address how they are promoting self-sufficiency. While these regulations are relatively new, this type of resident participation has long been part of the affordable housing repertoire and is often criticized either for being merely symbolic or for providing a mechanism to blame residents for the failures of the HAs or housing policies (Keyes 1992; Kato 2003).

Opportunities for self-sufficiency practitioners to interact with client advocates have been less extensive. While history shows the critical roles advocates have played in ensuring and expanding access to welfare and housing services, there is reason to expect restricted input as policy decisions are made in ways that are less visible (Pivan and Cloward 1993; Soss 2004; Diller 2000). The discretion that is essential to the self-sufficiency designs and practice exacerbates that invisibility. Legal services advocates continue to protect clients’ interests in hearings, yet rights are more difficult to protect when the quality of service depends on the rapport between case-manager and client or the availability of services in other agencies. Advocates continue to have some influence in changing policy regulations, as exemplified by the success in changing the definition of “welfare assistance” in the FSS regulations. Yet changes to

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16 Section 511 of 24 CFR part 903.
17 Section 8 only HAs are not exempt from the RAB requirement. Unlike HAs with public housing developments, however, they are not, required to have resident councils and thus are less experienced. For such HAs the provisions of the 1998 act are indeed new and may benefit from less skepticism among residents based on past experiences with superficial or biased resident participation efforts.
each HA’s administrative plans are a more amorphous advocacy target— notwithstanding the RABs and PHA plans—and actual practices are even harder for advocates to ascertain without ongoing relationships with front-line practitioners.

Although several FSS practitioners had some influence in the change of the definition of “welfare assistance,” there are no established channels of for ongoing communication with policy advocates. This absence is significant given that client advocates comprise key stakeholders in the system of governance and, as I argued in the previous chapter, are important contributors to practitioners’ process of discerning what “doing the right thing” entails and to legitimating practitioners efforts to “make programs better.”

**Opportunities for Street-Level Capacity Development:** Given how new the self-sufficiency technologies are to HAs, the task of developing the capacity of front-line workers to discern what is appropriate and improve ongoing practice is especially important. Riccucci and colleagues’ survey of welfare workers revealed that although formal training proved influential in clarifying program goals, workers received little training and most learning occurred informally (Riccucci 2005b). The study authors attribute the resulting implementation failures to this lack of training. The JobsPlus demonstration provides evidence for the value of technical assistance to self-sufficiency work. The implementation study recount examples of how this assistance helped practitioners and their managers to devise innovative solutions to emerging practice problems.

In contrast, most of the resources available to FSS and WtWV practitioners focus on clarifying the regulations. Shortly after the launch of the FSS program (in July 1992), the Section 8 Administrators Association in Massachusetts offered a two-day workshop on “How to Get Started.” The entire program was dedicated to explaining the regulations and was geared to Section 8 directors more than the line staff. More recently, the Association has invited FSS practitioners to deliver sessions to their counterparts at other agencies during its conferences. Similarly, the MNPHA occasionally includes topics relevant to the FSS program in its annual training conferences for the nonprofit regional housing associations. Training conferences and

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18 Since the period of observations addressed in the chapters that follow, two new institutions were formed that do seek to mediate between FSS practitioners and national policymakers. Jeff Lubell, former Director of HUD’s Policy Development Division of the Office of Policy Development and Research and former housing policy analysis for the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities established FSS Partnerships to promote awareness of FSS and to stimulate partnerships between HAs and other agencies and organizations interested in asset development with the support of a grant from Annie E. Casey Foundation to LISC. Lubell was instrumental in creating a new position to advocate for the FSS program and its practitioners as part of the American Association of Service Coordinators, a trade association that has traditional served those working in housing programs for the elderly and disabled.
web-casts offered by the firm assigned to provide technical assistance to WtWV staff also emphasized clarifying regulations, particularly concerning the provisions for eligibility determination and tracking inputs for reporting purposes. In later implementation phases, website postings included documentation of “best-practices.”

Nan McKay, a private consulting firm specializing in FSS training and other Section 8 administration offers more guidance about how to “do the right thing” for FSS clients in addition to clarifying how to “get the regulations right.” The firm offers an advanced seminar in case management that covers strategies for coordination with service partners and suggestions for developing trusting relationships with clients. However, many HAs are reluctant to finance the costs of attending those workshops, particularly when they have experienced or foresee turnover in the position.19

In the absence of other resources, much of the learning about self-sufficiency practice occurs among the practitioners themselves. In fact, one of the first tasks of the Greater Boston FSS Coordinators Group of the FSS practitioners working in public housing agencies was to hold their own conference designed for fellow practitioners. Forum members developed the entire curriculum and coordinated all of the logistics. FSS practitioners have also led sessions at the New England Resident Services Coordinators (NERSC) association’s annual conference, that like the aforementioned national AASC, has traditionally concentrated on service providers in housing for elderly and disabled residents20.

Questions about the Feasibility of Creative Practice in the Context of Weak Management Supports: Thus key questions for assessing the feasibility of creative responses to the challenges of self-sufficiency work concern the practitioners’ capacity to assess their efforts and motivate themselves to pursue them in the absence of strong organizational supports. How they find ways to communicate and coordinate with other system actors despite the lack of established channels and how they create new systems for interacting with them are also critical questions. Questions about how self-sufficiency practitioners can develop their capacity for self-sufficiency work and responding creatively to it also warrant further investigation.

19 An additional source of peer learning is the informal FSS listserv hosted on Yahoo for the discussion of HUD's Family Self Sufficiency program, the Section 8 homeownership program, and related topics. Although I have not examined the contributions to this source systematically, they appear to focus almost exclusively on clarifying ambiguities in program regulations and requirements for HUD grant applications as well as updates on developments in the social services arena more generally.
20 In fact, practitioners involved in my study joined me in two presentations at this conference, one on what we learned about the strategies of interorganizational collaboration and the other on practitioner discussion forums.
2.3 The Feasibility of Creative Street-Level Responses to the Challenges of Self-Sufficiency Designs

The previous section pointed to numerous challenges self-sufficiency practitioners must contend with to meet the high expectations of the programs. The ambiguity and conflict surrounding the goals, the challenges of employing the program technologies and their limitations for achieving what they were designed to accomplish, and the inadequacies of existing administrative structures and systems for providing guidance and support, communication channels, coordination mechanisms, and training opportunities all point to potential practice problems. At the same time, the designs also hold potential resources for creative street-level practice. The ambiguity of the goals affords opportunities for reinterpreting goals. The discretion to adapt procedures allows practitioners to introduce different combinations of familiar routines and to experiment with entirely novel technologies. The channels of communication and coordination with other system actors, although limited, are also devices for engaging partners in legitimating creative practices and participating in their implementation.

Is it feasible for frontline self-sufficiency practitioners to pursue creative practices to contend with the challenges of the designs? As I noted earlier, the evaluations of FSS and the WtWV program and the client success stories and accounts of “best practices” do not provide enough insights on actual self-sufficiency practice to assess the strategies employed to achieve results or pursue innovative ideas. Nor do they illustrate street-level practitioners’ efforts to grapple the practice problems or seek validation of their creative alternatives to established ways of working. Moreover, these accounts tend to focus on the more spectacular achievements as opposed to the more subtle repairs to internal operating procedures, ongoing interactions with service partners, or other aspects of everyday self-sufficiency practice.

This section, thus, probes what has been observed among frontline staff of other self-sufficiency programs. I close the section, and the chapter, with reflections on how the FSS and JOBLink designs, the practitioner discussion forums, and my research approach afford a more conducive opportunity for exploring the feasibility of creative street-level practice and for learning about how it works.
Evidence of Coping: Much of the research examining what has transpired on the frontlines of welfare reform and welfare-to-work programs suggests that self-sufficiency practitioners tend to resort to coping mechanisms in the face of the pressures the challenges of the high expectations designs generate rather pursue creative solutions (Bane and Ellwood 1994; Brodkin 1997, Meyers et al. 1998; Meyers et al. 2001; Sandfort 1999, 2000, 2003; Iverson 2000; Ricucci 2005). These studies evidence each of the coping mechanisms Michael Lipsky identified in his classic work. They show that welfare workers tend to focus on the easier to complete routine tasks of eligibility determination and compliance monitoring rather than the more complex tasks related to encouraging employment (Sandfort 2000, 2003; Ricucci 2005).

These studies show that where welfare workers do engage in the more difficult tasks of self-sufficiency work, they often perform them in a perfunctory manner. Observations show that workers tend to make cursory or rote assessments rather than conduct thorough assessments of clients' needs to prepare for the job market. The research also finds that many workers simply assume their clients are seeking work instead of inquiring about their efforts to find work and the challenges they are encountering (Brodkin 1997; Sandfort 2000). Findings also point to welfare workers who blame clients for not finding employment on their own by denying that jobs are scarce.

The mechanism of rationing services is used to cope with inadequate resources as exemplified by accounts of self-sufficiency workers' attempts to fill slots for available types of services regardless of their appropriateness to clients' actual needs (Brodkin 1997). Reports from the frontlines also evidence that self-sufficiency practitioners reject claims of clients who are especially difficult to serve and direct favored clients to slots in preferred programs (Brodkin 1997). Additionally, findings suggest that some self-sufficiency practitioners exert their authority over clients by issuing threats of sanctions without seeking alternatives to helping clients fulfill the requirements (Brodkin 1997; Iversen 2000; Sandfort 2000, 2003).

These researchers take pains to clarify that this resort to coping mechanisms is not entirely the fault of the welfare workers. Rather, they are consequences of the structural constraints and the conflicts and confusion over program goals. For example, a study of one work-first demonstration program led its authors to conclude:
If welfare workers did not implement Work Pays, it was not due to their opposition to policy changes. Welfare workers rarely engaged in transformational transactions with their clients because they could not, given the structure of their jobs and their understanding of the mission of the welfare system. ... Although the official message was that 'it pays to work,' in most respects it did not pay for welfare workers to engage their clients in planning for work and self-sufficiency. (Meyers and Dillon 1999 p 247)

Researchers of welfare reform implementation also point to the additional coping mechanism of resisting change. They suggest that, in the face of the uncertainty, ambiguity, and conflicting ideas about the goals described above, workers not only find comfort in the familiar; they are under pressure to accomplish those tasks they already know they are able to do well. (Bane and Ellwood 1994; Iversen 2000 p. 153; Riccucci 2005, Sandfort 2000, 2003).

**Creativity with Support of Management:** Coping is not the only feasible response to the challenges of implementing self-sufficiency programs. Other studies of self-sufficiency program implementation have observed innovative responses to the challenges of the program designs. For example, Kate Cooney’s (2007) study of a welfare-to-work program found evidence of coping strategies. 21 But she also witnessed the establishment of job training workshops for participants as a means to address the limitations of the program’s work-first technology. However, although frontline workers were involved in the establishment of the workshops, and may have initiated the endeavor, Cooney’s account suggests that they relied on extensive support of their supervisors as well as the resources and skills of their business partners to carry out the idea. Thus the example of innovation is not creative street-level practice as I defined it in Chapter 1.

Similarly, the studies of the implementation of the JobsPlus demonstration program in public housing developments recount innovative solutions to several of the practice problems noted above that make use of resources available in the programmatic environment. With the support of executive directors and mid-level managers who are committed to the success of the program, JobsPlus staff found ways to win the cooperation of coworkers in other departments and other service agencies. With the help of MDRC experts, they developed novel instruments to explain the financial incentives to clients. They took advantage of their on-site location and

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21 Cooney’s study also illuminates the capacity of frontline workers to respond strategically to challenges they confront in practice even if their strategies lead them to “pragmatic acceptance” of the limitations of what they are able to do. These findings are similar to those of Jodi Sandfort discussed in the following section.
designated budgets to hold special events for residents of the entire public housing development as a means to encourage participation, foster good relationships between staff and residents, and encourage residents to initiate new ideas for engaging their neighbors.

These examples suggest that there is "latent potential" for street-level creativity. They do not, however, illuminate whether frontline practitioners who lack such support from their managers are able to employ the strategies discussed in the previous chapter to improve program operations and designs.

Prospects for Creative Street-Level Responses to the Challenges of Self-Sufficiency Designs

Jodi Sandfort's (1999, 2000a and b, 2003) fieldwork on the frontlines of welfare-to-work agencies and welfare offices suggests that street-level service workers have the capacity to do more than respond passively to the pressures of the high expectation programs even when they do not have the management support reflected in the previous examples. She suggests that these frontline workers engage in each of the strategies of creative street-level practice I identified in Chapter 1. Her observations show that the practitioners apply their knowledge from practice and the resources of their work environments to make new sense of the directives stipulated in the official designs. She asserts:

In organizations charged with developing their own interventions, staff themselves must craft what they perceive to be legitimate means for achieving the organizations’ goals. In turn, this technology comes to have structuring properties; it helps direct staff action, minimizes their distractions and provides them a standard to rely on to interpret daily events and experiences. In this way the process actually allows street-level workers to carry out their day-to-day tasks in spite of the technological uncertainty of how to move welfare recipients into the workforce. (2003, p. 617-8).

Sandfort shows that self-sufficiency workers do not merely pursue coping mechanisms by passive default. Rather, her field work in welfare offices suggests that workers actively resist reforms and reference their knowledge about the technical requirements of compliance and eligibility work to rationalize their inability to meet the additional expectations of the work oriented policy designs. Sandfort concludes that frontline staff within the public welfare bureaucracy depend on their collective knowledge and organizational resources to develop the structure within which they operate. This structure provides them a way to interpret events and justify inaction. It helps to sustain the isolation of front-line public welfare work from the external environment, to justify staff resistance to minor changes in tasks, and to blind them to alternative ways of responding to more substantial changes. (2000: 746-7).
According to Sandfort, these frontline workers use the tools of discretion and their knowledge from practice to justify doing less instead of doing more for their clients. In fact, she attributes the failed cooperation between welfare offices and their employment placement counterparts in welfare-to-work agencies to each group’s reified interpretations of what doing their work entails. She thus attributes the failed interorganizational cooperation — the other creative practice strategy — to the overly rigid reliance on current interpretations of work routines that preclude recognition of interdependencies and that, in turn, curtail trust in one another’s competence.

Sandfort conjectures that this capacity to reinterpret goals and technologies for pursuing them could have the reverse effect of inspiring recognition of mutual interests and occasioning the cooperative work to improve services for the shared clientele. In fact, this possibility of productive rather than recalcitrant agency seems to motivate her project. Although she finds more adaptation to official directives and less outright resistance to the self-sufficiency agenda in her observations of welfare-to-work practice than she did in the welfare offices, her fieldwork did not evidence such street-level contributions.

I take a closer look at three examples from Sandfort’s study of welfare-to-work agencies to examine her observations about how frontline workers contend with the limitations of self-sufficiency designs in light of my definition of creative street-level practice. In each of the following examples, the welfare-to-work practitioners find new uses for available resources to facilitate their practice according to their “collective understanding” of what self-sufficiency practice should do. In one agency, welfare-to-work staff developed extensive computerized procedures for monitoring clients’ attendance instead of using the computers in job search and training workshops or devoting energy to actively cultivating relationships with potential employers. They justified this simplification of the program design with reference to their collective belief that clients’ motivation to look for work is sufficient to succeed in the region’s strong economy. In another agency, workers’ understanding of what is necessary for people to make the transition from welfare to work was in conflict with the official work-first approach. Although, these practitioners lacked computers, training curriculum, and other material resources to provide the more extensive training they believed their clients required, they used their “folk wisdom” to provide workshops on job readiness and life skills as time allowed. However, most
of their time was devoted to paperwork, a task they reluctantly justified as a contractual obligation.

In a third example, workers endorsed the work-first technology, yet unlike their counterparts in the first example, they used their computers and classrooms for a interactive job search workshops and individualized coaching. They developed relationships with employers and worked aggressively to connect clients with job openings. They not only tailored strategies for each client; they made sure that each job applicant had reliable transportation and appropriate clothing for important interviews. When clients faced obstacles to work or were not motivated to pursue job opportunities, however, the practitioners of this agency referred them back to the welfare offices despite their encroaching time limits.

Each of these examples evidences aspects of my definition of creative street-level practice. However, they do not satisfy it entirely. In the first case, the welfare to work staff behaved similarly to their welfare office counterparts referenced in the above quote. They designed novel compliance monitoring procedures yet they did not attempt to address a practice problem that interfered with work they considered valuable for meeting program objectives. Although Sandfort reports that the staff noticed repeated attendance at orientation and deduced that many clients had yet to secure stable jobs on their own, this insight did not lead them to revisit current practices. The practitioners of the second example discerned that their workshops improved their service to clients, albeit not as much as they would have liked to do. Yet, in terms of the practitioners’ own understanding of what works, their commitment to extensive compliance monitoring actually constitutes coping. In the third example, staff endeavors to help their already motivated clients might be construed as creative. However, we do not learn enough from Sandfort’s account to assess whether these practices are departures from established agency routines or how they may have emerged as solutions to previously recognized practice problems. Nor do the practitioners find creative approaches to the problem of clients who are not ready for work or are not already motivated to seek it.

Thus these examples suggest that street-level workers are capable of justifying the appropriateness of their novel uses of available resources. However, they fall short of my definition of creative street-level practice in three fundamental respects. First, they do not create enough novelty and value to meet their own expectations of what constitutes good self-sufficiency practice. Secondly, although Sandfort identifies the practitioners’ “collective
understandings” of what self-sufficiency work entails and implies that they rationalize their interpretations of what is appropriate, we do not hear how the practitioners defend their theories-in-use when they are challenged by other system actors. Thus there is not enough justification that the beliefs are well founded in self-sufficiency practice as it is grounded in interactions throughout the system of governance. Third, we do not witness how the frontline workers alter their practices or amend their theories-in-use in the face of evidence that contradicts initial expectations about what works.

This limited view of the process of street-level inquiry into what constitutes good self-sufficiency practice makes it difficult to discern the difference between creative practice and “group think.” In effect, the “collective understandings” appear to be little more than the aggregate of “personal justice beliefs” bolstered by the legitimating power of the same front-line solidarity that is so criticized in the classical bureaucracy scholarship. The practitioners’ understanding of what works in practice based on the knowledge from practice is assumed rather than demonstrated.

These limitations are not surprising given how difficult it is to observe tacit understanding and its development. Sandfort’s extensive field work included 240 hours of observation including staff meetings and informal social events where staff presumably talked about their frustrations in applying the self-sufficiency technologies and had opportunities to engage in problem solving. She also convened several focus groups and conducted dozens of interviews with frontline staff and local managers to elicit their perspectives. Yet these methods proved more conducive to deducing the practitioners’ understandings of the goals and obligations of self-sufficiency work than to exposing their efforts to overcome the obstacles and push beyond the limitations of the designs as transmitted. Thus we miss attention to the practice problems as indications of the need to depart from established procedures and as benchmarks against which to assess the value the departure from routines generates.

Furthermore, Sandfort’s extensive observations lead us to the “collective understandings” as articulated within the confines of the organization; they let us hear the agreements rather than the disagreements. We do not hear how the practitioners engage different experiences and opinions about what is appropriate in their efforts to develop better practices. Although Sandfort’s field work spanned a two-year period, we do not witness how street-level practices evolved over time, in response to experimentation with alternatives and the workers’ emerging understanding of
their experiences and others’ interpretations of these experiences. Nor do we see how external events establish new resources for reinventing practices and forging relationships or, conversely, result in new problems that make previous practices unworkable.

Interestingly, the challenge of studying creative street-level practice has much in common with self-sufficiency practice itself. I have demonstrated that the numerous obstacles in the environment and the clients’ lives mean that employment and earnings outcomes are not good indications of how hard clients are trying to meet the self-sufficiency goals. Sandfort shares this perspective that client outcomes are even less adequate assessments of frontline workers’ contributions to implementation success. Sandfort’s account of street-level struggles gives us some indication of the practitioners’ struggles and frustrations. While her accounts hint at workers’ motivation to make a “good faith effort” in spite of the obstacles, she does not demonstrate how they push against those obstacles in pursuit of interim goals they set for themselves.

Moreover, she does not give us insights into what they do to stay motivated in the absence of immediate evidence that their efforts are working and without expressed appreciation of their commitment to the endeavor. Applying the theories of motivation reviewed at the end of my discussion of self-sufficiency technologies to the practitioners themselves suggests that cultivating and generating intrinsic motivation are as central to the ongoing practice of creativity within the constraints of the front-lines of public serving bureaucracies as it is to the efforts of the clients to secure well-paying jobs within the reality of the labor markets and social institutions in their communities.

Sandfort would likely agree with these critiques. Indeed, she suggests that more should be done to “harness the energy of street-level workers for the achievement of public ends” (2000, p. 732). And her list of avenues for further research on the structuration of technology among street-level workers includes several of the questions inferred in my critique.

**Advantages of Different Program Designs and an Alternative Research Approach**

My study of FSS and JOBLink practice through the lens of the three discussion forums aims to pursue this possibility that frontline practitioners who lack authority, resources, and professional status, or the engaged support of those above them in the institutional hierarchy, can engage in the strategies of creative street-level practice to contend with the challenges of the self-sufficiency designs. My project has three sets of advantages over the implementation research
analyzed in this chapter. The FSS and JOBLink designs may be more conducive to creative street-level practice than other self-sufficiency programs. The discussion forums where the practitioners gather to discuss how they grapple with the challenges of meeting the high expectations of the programs despite the inadequate designs and the less than optimal conditions in the implementation environment provide the practitioners opportunities to enhance their capacity for creative practice. And I adopt a research approach that is more conducive to observing the practitioners’ efforts to address the practice problems.

**The Program Designs:** In some respects, the designs of the two housing-based self-sufficiency programs may be more amenable to creative street-level practice than the welfare programs. The fact that FSS and JOBLink are additions to existing programs rather than near systemic overhauls means that the practitioners do not need to contend with the challenge of changing the old while adopting the new. On the one hand, the peripheral relation of the programs to the housing agency’s core mission of providing quality affordable housing means that the practitioners lack managers’ attention and support. On the other hand, the ensuing autonomy is a potential advantage to experimentation with alternatives to accepted procedures.  

Another reason that creativity may be more feasible in these housing-based programs is that the program designs are more robust than the TANF programs and work-first predecessors, particularly in the case of FSS. FSS provides a larger canvas of self-sufficiency goals, a more diverse palette of technologies, and the relatively wide discretion to use these materials to craft creative approaches to self-sufficiency practice. While both FSS and JL share the ambiguous technologies of self-sufficiency work that facilitate the structuration process of Sandfort’s welfare and welfare-to-work workers, the program goals are somewhat more clearly delineated in the housing-based programs. FSS and JOBLink practitioners can – and as the following chapters show, they do – actively interpret and re-interpret these goals in response to their “collective understandings” of what works and what clients and other system actors value. They may also be less overwhelmed by the initially unfamiliar self-sufficiency agenda than their counterparts depicted in the studies of welfare reform implementation.

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22 For an elaboration of the idea that innovation is more likely to occur at the margins of organizations’ core mission see Pfeffer and Salancik 1978.
**The Community of Practice and Discussion Forums:** Unlike other studies of street-level practice, I shift my attention from the focus on the frontlines of particular organizations to learn about the community of practice as well as the solo practitioner. As I have suggested in the theoretical analysis of the previous chapter, the practitioner discussion forums provide opportunities for deliberation with others that are unavailable within the confines of the organizations or the interactions with partners in other agencies. They counter the sense of isolation Sandfort and her colleagues describe and they neutralize – at least for the duration of the meetings – the power dynamics that promote the disconnected and contentious discourse typical of bureaucratic communication. They also afford the possibility of acting collectively in addition to learning with one another.

**My Research Approach:** As I noted in the critique of Sandfort’s studies and introduction to the dissertation, my research approach differs from previous studies in several respects. The perspective gained from observing the practitioner discussion forums not only allows me to investigate the forums as a subject of analysis; it is also a critical methodological device. The discussion forums allow me to hear how the “collective understandings” of the type Sandfort examines emerge from the practitioners’ reflections on experiences, beliefs, and understandings and the different perspectives of members of the community of practice about them.

In addition to the lens of the practitioner discussion forums, my approach is distinctive in focusing on the practitioners’ responses to specific practice problems in addition as opposed to either an objective analysis of the problems or the outcomes of the practitioners’ actions as they relate to the program goals. While the nature of the problems and the results – or perceived results – of the practitioners’ activities are part of the project, it is the engagement with the practice problems that frames the inquiry.

The historical perspective that spans critical turning points in the life cycle of the program, the implementation environment, and the development of the practitioners’ creative responses is also distinctive. Comparative analysis between the two programs, the three practitioner discussion forums, and different service environments also affords insights into the conditions that are conducive to street-level creativity that previous studies were unable to examine.

Finally, all of these methods of inquiry allow me to focus on the practitioners’ efforts to participate in the tasks of improving programs, discerning the appropriateness of their responses,
and developing their capacity to do so more effectively. I elaborate on the value of this focus on effort as opposed to performance and my methods for examining it in the introduction to Part II.
PART II
In Pursuit of Creativity: Street-Level Responses to Practice Problems

The chapters of Part II examine the feasibility of creative street-level practice and explore how street-level creativity works in practice. My analysis of the FSS and JOBLink forum members' responses to practice problems aims to substantiate the claims that street-level practitioners can and do contribute to the work of governance. I describe how they improve ongoing program operations and program designs by employing the strategies of bricolage, coordination and collaboration, and strategic sensemaking. I explain how they legitimate their departures from standard procedures by discerning what works in practice, by interacting with other system actors, and by deliberating with one another. And I examine how they develop their capacity to meet the high expectations of the program.

Each chapter also describes the conditions that facilitate creative street-level practice. The practitioner discussion forums are key facets of that context. They are sometimes also focal actors in creative pursuits. These chapters describe how the practitioner discussion forums help their members pursue each of these tasks, both as individuals operating in their own agencies and service districts and as communities of practice working together. And I examine how participation in the forums develops members' capacity for self-sufficiency work and its creative practice by fostering learning and by sustaining their motivation to keep up the effort. In addition, I identify the factors in the implementation environment that foster and hinder the use of the strategies, the value gained from the new approaches to self-sufficiency practice, and the legitimation and actualization of their creative ideas.

Research Approach: Studying Efforts to Respond to Practice Problems

As I explained in the introduction to Part I, the chapters of Part II build on my analysis of the possibility of creative street-level practice. The analysis of the feasibility of the pursuit of creative approaches to self-sufficiency work is the next step of the inquiry. The examples of creative practices I sketched in the introduction to the dissertation provided enough evidence to dismiss the null hypothesis that it is impossible for frontline workers with minimal authority, resources, and professional status to contribute to the work of governance. The theory of street-level creativity developed in Chapter 1 aimed to explain that these examples are not merely idiosyncratic flukes or “best practices,” but rather a mode of practice that can be pursued in
numerous contexts. To understand how feasible creative practice requires more than examples and a theoretical rationale; it requires insight into what is likely to be realized given the practitioners’ capabilities and the resources at hand.

I also want to distinguish the question of feasibility from the analysis of probability. While I do aim to identify the factors that explain the likelihood that street-level practitioners or their communities of practice will engage in creative practice as opposed to other responses to practice problems, I do not seek to ascertain the odds that they will do so. Explaining the likelihood that frontline service workers will seek to improve practices instead of shirking, coping, following the regulations, or making appropriate situational adjustments is a worthy endeavor that I hope the findings from these chapters can inform. However, the fact that a creative response did not occur – or was not observed – does not mean that it could not have occurred if the practitioners had been able to make enough of an effort or the right kind of effort. Nor does it say what might have been feasible with more encouragement and support. Moreover, neither the investigations of occurrence or frequency of creative responses illuminate the kinds of efforts necessary to move from conception to legitimation and realization.

I also want to call attention to the practitioners’ efforts to find or design creative practices and put into place alternatives to the official self-sufficiency technologies because I am interested in learning about feasible expectations of the practitioners as opposed to the feasibility that the results of their actions will achieve the desired results for clients. As I explained in Chapter 1, the assessment of creativity is subjective. Several of the creative practices described in the following chapters yield objectively discernable outputs such as increases in participants enrolled in the FSS program or in compliance with the JOBLink work requirements or the number of loan recipients and workshop attendees. However, other novel practices the practitioners consider value-adding are more difficult to measure, especially to those who are not members of their community of self-sufficiency practitioners. Moreover, the impact of even the more easily measured outputs on client outcomes is often difficult or impossible to discern, at least in the time frame of everyday practice and with the skills and resources the practitioners have at their disposal. Thus instead of attempting to link the practitioners’ actions to evidence of increases in earnings or accumulation of assets or other assessments of what is considered sufficient for economic independence, I examine the practitioners’ efforts to meet the expectations.
My method of discerning the practitioners' efforts to meet the expectations by means of the creative practice strategies followed a process similar to the one the JOBLink practitioners employed to discern whether their clients were making a "good faith effort" to comply the program requirements. This creative process is the subject of the final chapter of Part II. Like the JOBLink practitioners, I began by ascertaining the barriers to doing what is expected. I identified several practice problems the self-sufficiency practitioners encountered in the course of striving to make FSS and JOBLink work. I then analyzed the practitioners' responses to selected practice problems to establish whether they fit the two facets of the definition of creative street-level practice from Chapter 1: the departure from official designs or established practices and the practitioners' assessment of the value of the departure.

In addition to analyzing the practitioners' reports of what they did – as individuals and as a group – and what they thought about these activities, I sought to ascertain how they were striving to meet the expectations in ways that did not necessarily lead to actions. I listened to their accounts of their struggles to contend with the obstacles they encountered as they sought to respond to practice problems. Accounts of their triumphs not only illuminated achievements that, as an outsider to the community of practice, I would not have noticed; they also conveyed how difficult it often was to achieve these small wins.

I also examined forum members' discussions to understand the effort their deliberative process entailed even when it did not result in actions. Discussions about some creative ideas revealed the diligent pursuit of changes or additions to practice that did not come to fruition, not for lack of trying, but for lack of the requisite conditions or supports. In other cases, the discussion demonstrated their process of determining that a proposed endeavor was beyond their capacity to attempt without additional resources or authority and thus was not worth further investment of energy. This assessment of the practicability of their creative ideas was in itself an effort I sought to analyze.

I also analyzed the development of forum members' efforts to design, legitimate, and refine creative practices over time. Such process tracing aimed to assess the groups' persistence to take incremental steps towards addressing practice problems they would likely not have been able to muster in one attempt, even with the concerted efforts of all of the forum members. This historical analysis of meeting discussions also allowed me to notice when their patience for slow
progress and flagging motivation curtailed their capacity to follow through with their creative ideas.

The opportunities forum members created to develop one another’s capacity to make their efforts to engage in self-sufficiency work and creative practice more effective and more sustainable were also key to understanding what is feasible to expect from frontline workers. The value of this dedication to learning and to keeping up the effort in the face of frequent defeat was also something I learned from the FSS and JOBLink practitioners’ theories-in-use about motivating their clients: Setting goals that are not merely feasible to achieve but also require enough of a stretch to feel rewarding can inspire the next steps towards setting and meeting still higher expectations. Thus studying feasible expectations— as opposed to feasible objectives— necessitates ascertaining how much of a stretch is muscle-building and how much is just more strain.

Selection of the Practice Problems for the Study

The chapters that follow analyze the self-sufficiency practitioners’ responses to three practice problems: enrolling clients in the program, connecting them with services, and sustaining their motivation to pursue the self-sufficiency goals. Several criteria guided my selection of these problems from among the numerous challenges the practitioners encounter in their efforts to meet the high expectations of FSS and JOBLink. One criterion was the relevance to other social programs. Client recruitment is central to all programs; without clients there is no program. The challenge of service referral in the context of fragmented and under-resourced delivery systems is an ongoing concern of social welfare practitioners and public management scholars. Although there is increasing interest in how referral networks function and the prospects of inter-organizational collaboration, frontline workers’ specific contributions to these processes has received less attention. Strategies for motivating clients to pursue the life transforming objectives of the self-sufficiency paradigm is one of the most ambiguous components of the program designs and thus warrants further research.

These three practice problems are also good choices for this study because, together, they emphasize each of the aspects of the program designs. Enrolling clients is a challenge because the program design does not specify the technology for doing so. Service referral is challenging because of the scarcity of quality resources and also because the referral technology and the organizing structures for interaction with service partners are inadequate. Sustaining clients’
motivation is a practice problem both because the goals specified in the official designs are exceedingly narrow and because they fail to specify effective strategies for helping clients reach them.

An additional reason I selected these problems is that the practitioners encountered obstacles and resources for creative responses to them in each of the aspects of the implementation environment identified in Chapter 1. While all three spheres of the environment influence every aspect of self-sufficiency practice to some extent, responses to each practice problem highlight how different aspects of the environment influence creative practice. Responses to the challenge of enrollment feature the administrative procedures and relationships with staff of other programs in the housing organizations. Creative responses to the challenges of connecting clients to services involve developing relationships with partners in the service delivery systems. The practitioners' efforts to develop novel ways of motivating their clients highlight obstacles and opportunities in all three spheres depicted in Figure 1.4: the organizational environment, the service delivery system, and the economic and policy context.

Perhaps most significantly, the three practice problems were among the most salient to the practitioners themselves. These were the problems that surfaced most frequently in my preliminary fieldwork in one of the eight nonprofit agencies conducted prior to this project and in my interviews with other FSS practitioners. They were also among the most frequently discussed in the forums.¹

Methods for Analyzing the Responses to the Practice Problems:

I analyzed the practitioners' responses to these practice problems through an iterative and multi-staged process. In the first stage, I coded the transcripts of the forum meetings with respect to facets of the practice problems, solutions pursued by individual practitioners and by the groups, the strategies employed, modes of forum discourse, and other characteristics of the forum as a community of practice.² I produced summaries for each meeting that identified the concerns, problems, and observations forum members discussed, reports on actions taken or

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¹ The three topics were also among the priorities identified in a discussion I facilitated with the nonprofit FSS practitioners to select a topic for exploration. Several of the topics not selected are inextricably linked to the ones I have selected. For example, the challenges of tracking participants' income changes in order to calculate escrow savings in FSS and to monitor compliance with the work requirement in JOBLink relate to the problem of poor inter-programmatic communication within the agencies.
² Initially, I used an open coding system. Later stages of coding included axial and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998).
planned by individuals and the group, decisions made, primary modes of discussion, and the key contextual factors framing the discussion and influencing the activities discussed. Throughout this process, I discerned themes and developed “mini-theories” (Strauss and Corbin 1998). I also compiled and analyzed files of excerpts from meeting transcripts, my analytic memos, and other data sources (Weiss 1997).

Analyzing these memos and excerpt files informed the ideas about creative street-level practice presented in Chapter 1. Additionally, this synthesis of my initial gleanings from the empirical work and my critical review of prevailing theories of street-level behavior structured subsequent stages of analysis of what I heard in the meetings. It also guided additional data collection, including interviews and discussions with the practitioners and other key informants to clarify and fill in missing information and to get feedback on my initial ideas.

In the next stage of analysis, I characterized the responses to each of the practice problems in relation to the definition of creative street-level practice. I constructed narratives of the practitioners’ accounts of their responses that detailed the strategies employed and resources utilized as well as the extent to which they enacted their creative ideas. I identified the contextual factors that were mentioned in the practitioners’ accounts of their experiences and that I gleaned from other sources. Some of these narratives focused on individual practitioners’ efforts while others featured the forum as a collective and still others involved both individual and collective efforts.

This characterization determined the combination of historical and comparative analysis I employed for the final stages of analysis of the efforts to engage in creative practice. I delineated the time frame for the historical analysis to capture key turning points in the policy and economic environment and their influence on the inter-related emergence of practice problems and creative practices. Some of the comparative analysis took advantage of the similarity of the programmatic and administrative contexts and state policy and economic environment to surface the effects of differences across the nonprofit organizations and their service districts. (See Table II-B.) I also compared and contrasted the programs and the three forums. (See Table II-A.)

As the practitioners’ discourse is central to creative practice in the forums and is key to my research methodology, I frequently examine their dialogue closely. To that end, I reproduce excerpts from the meeting meetings minutes for the course of the analysis in several of the
chapters. [In this draft, several of these excerpts are included as separate documents. In the final chapter, they will appear in the text in the same manner as tables and figures.]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FSS Nonprofit</th>
<th>JL Nonprofit</th>
<th>FSS Public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Life span</strong></td>
<td>1994 to the present</td>
<td>2000 to the present</td>
<td>1994 to the present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of members</strong></td>
<td>about a dozen</td>
<td>about a dozen</td>
<td>about 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meeting facilitation</strong></td>
<td>chaired by an agency Director</td>
<td>chaired by an agency Director</td>
<td>self-chaired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reporting obligation</strong> (in addition to HUD)</td>
<td>Rental Assistance Committee</td>
<td>Rental Assistance Committee and Steering Committee</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of meetings observed from 2000 to 2005</strong></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Focus of Each Chapter

The following five chapters analyze the practitioners’ responses to the practice problems I selected. I highlight different self-sufficiency programs, practitioner discussion forums, and historical time frames in accordance with the nature of the challenges and the aspect of creative practice I have chosen to elucidate. Similarly, the chapters also differ with respect to the emphasis on the efforts of individual forum members and the collective efforts of the forum as a whole. Table II-C summarizes the focus of each chapter, its primary methods and units of analysis, and some of the key findings.

Chapter 3 tells the story of how the FSS practitioners in the nonprofit agencies gradually surmounted the challenge of enrolling the requisite number of participants in the program. The story spans over ten years of self-sufficiency practice and traces the forum members’ individual and collective efforts to employ the strategies of bricolage, coordinating with colleagues from other departments, and sensemaking. Analysis takes into account developments in the program life cycle, from the early stages of implementation and the establishment of the forum, through its maturation as well as the introduction of welfare reform and the onset of the JOBLink program. Where pertinent, I also examine differences across the eight housing agencies. Many of the practitioners’ efforts were modestly or questionably successful. Some were abandoned or never fully pursued.
### Table II-B:
Comparison of Massachusetts Nonprofit Housing Association Agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Agency Focus</th>
<th>Section 8 Program Size</th>
<th>FSS minimum program size</th>
<th>Self-Sufficiency Practitioners (2003)</th>
<th>Service Area</th>
<th>Urban Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berkshire Housing, Inc (BHSI)</td>
<td>housing</td>
<td>small</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>one for both</td>
<td>Berkshire</td>
<td>one smaller city, small town, and rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Training, Inc. (CTI)</td>
<td>multi-service</td>
<td>medium</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>one for FSS; two half time for JOBLink</td>
<td>Northern</td>
<td>urban, small town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Assistance Corporation (HAC)</td>
<td>housing</td>
<td>small</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>one for both</td>
<td>Barnstable,</td>
<td>small town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hampden Hampshire Housing Partnership (HAP)</td>
<td>housing</td>
<td>large</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>two each for FSS and JOBLink; one</td>
<td>Hampshire,</td>
<td>urban/small town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership (MBHP)</td>
<td>housing</td>
<td>very large</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>three for FSS; two for JOBLink; one</td>
<td>Boston and</td>
<td>urban-metropolitan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Housing, Inc. (RHI)</td>
<td>housing</td>
<td>large</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>one for each</td>
<td>Northern and</td>
<td>small town, rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC)</td>
<td>multi-service</td>
<td>small</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>one for both</td>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>suburban/urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Shore Housing Development Corp. (SSHDC)</td>
<td>housing</td>
<td>medium</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>one for each</td>
<td>Plymouth and</td>
<td>suburban, small town</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the strategy of creative coordination and collaboration in the context of the FSS program. Chapter 4 explores how the individual practitioners engage potential partners in the service delivery system to improve the services their clients receive. The comparative analysis across the eight nonprofit agencies makes use of data derived from an
innovative research instrument I designed together with an FSS practitioner. I describe the methods of analysis at the beginning of that chapter. Findings illuminate the contextual factors that explain the variation in the practitioners’ service networks and their use of four categories of value-adding creative coordination techniques.

Chapter 5 explores how the practitioner discussion forums facilitate creative coordination. It traces the incremental development of the FSS Fleet Loan Program noted in the introduction to the dissertation and several advocacy efforts undertaken by each of the FSS forums. Comparative analysis of the nonprofit and public forums aims to elucidate the surprising finding that the community of practitioners who work in public housing agencies were more successful in following through with their creative ideas than their counterparts in the nonprofit agencies.

I study the self-sufficiency practitioners’ efforts to motivate their clients in Chapters 6 and 7. Chapter 6 focuses on the nonprofit FSS practitioners’ creative practices of convening groups of clients in addition to the required one-on-one case management specified in the program design with the aim of enhancing their sense of self-worth and developing life skills for pursuing their self-sufficiency goals. Analysis over time elucidates the evolution of the community of practice’s assessment of the value of their creative practices. I also compare the creative practices the practitioners pursue independently with those they perform collectively.

Chapter 7 tells the story of the incremental development of the JOBLink practitioners’ theory-in-use of motivation and their cumulative compilation of creative practices to enact it over the entire, five-year lifecycle of the program. In addition, the historical analysis traces the co-evolution of practice problems and creative practices in light of the recession of 2001 and state budget cuts. The chapter closes with a comparison between the efforts to use the bricolage and sensemaking strategies in the context of the two programs.

The discussion of the findings in each chapter suggests that creative street-level practice is feasible. Participation in the practitioner discussion forums makes it more feasible and more sustainable. And both individual practitioners and their communities of practice benefit from the encouragement and support from agency and state-level decision makers. None of the chapters posit that creative street-level practice or attendance at discussion forums produces miracles. Street-level practitioners cannot make up for poorly designed programs, inadequate resources, antagonistic inter-staff relations, or contradictory policy environments. However, the findings
suggest that with the support of their community of practice, street-level practitioners can make meeting high expectations more feasible in hard times.

In the conclusion that follows Part II, I synthesize the insights from these chapters and the additional questions they raise about how to cultivate communities of street-level practitioners so that creative practice is more feasible and so that the practitioners’ efforts to improve programs are substantiated as enduring innovations.

Table IIC: Focus of Each Chapter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Chapter 3</th>
<th>Chapter 4</th>
<th>Chapter 5</th>
<th>Chapter 5</th>
<th>Chapter 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practice Problem</td>
<td>Enrolling Clients/ Getting Started</td>
<td>Linking Clients/ Making Connections</td>
<td>Motivating Clients/ Discerning Effort and Developing Capacities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Featured Program and Practitioner Discussion Forum</td>
<td>nonprofit FSS forum</td>
<td>nonprofit FSS</td>
<td>nonprofit &amp; public FSS</td>
<td>nonprofit FSS forum</td>
<td>JOBLink forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focal Actors</td>
<td>individual &amp; collective</td>
<td>individual</td>
<td>collective</td>
<td>historical</td>
<td>historical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Mode of Analysis</td>
<td>historical</td>
<td>comparative</td>
<td>historical and comparative</td>
<td>historical</td>
<td>historical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Sphere of the Environment</td>
<td>organization</td>
<td>social service delivery system</td>
<td>organization; social service delivery system; broader policy and economic environment</td>
<td>organization; social service delivery system; broader policy and economic environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Strategy Pursued</td>
<td>bricolage and sensemaking; inter-programmatic coordination</td>
<td>creative coordination and collaboration</td>
<td>bricolage and sensemaking</td>
<td>bricolage and sensemaking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope of Creative Practices Pursued</td>
<td>procedural improvements; mostly unsuccessful or abandoned policy changes</td>
<td>procedural improvements and new program elements</td>
<td>new program elements and policy changes</td>
<td>new program elements</td>
<td>procedural improvements; new program elements; and regulatory changes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 3
Getting Started is Hard to Do: Street-Level Responses to the Challenges of Enrolling Self-Sufficiency Participants

Virtually all social service programs begin with the challenge of enrolling eligible participants; without participants, there is no program. In theory, recruiting clients for FSS should be easy. The incentive of the escrow account discussed in the previous chapter is intended to automatically entice prospective applicants to the program; clients stand to gain sizable savings if their income increases over the five-year period of participation. Moreover, those who enroll have nothing to lose by enrolling as FSS participants since they can keep their housing subsidies even if they continue to depend on welfare assistance. Nevertheless, the aphorism proves true: getting started is hard to do.

In practice, FSS enrollment requires considerable effort both on the part of clients and for the self-sufficiency practitioners. From the perspective of the clients, enrolling in FSS means embarking on a potentially dramatic life-transforming course and making a commitment to a five-year plan for self-advancement. For the FSS practitioners, getting started has proved even more challenging. Recruiting prospective clients means identifying particularly motivated clients from the pool of current tenants, a technology that is not specified in the official program directives. Moreover, enrollment is not complete until the practitioner conducts a needs assessment and the prospective participants sign the contract of participation outlining their goals and detailing their plan of action. Nor are there adaptable recruitment and enrollment strategies in the existing repertoire of Section 8 procedures where the long waiting lists for scarce housing subsidies means that demand always exceeds supply and enrollment is a matter of technical assessment of eligibility criteria.

The challenge of FSS enrollment is not about getting the rules right. The participation goals are clear; set targets for program size do not require the practitioners to discern how many clients they should bring into the program. However, recruiting prospective clients, signing them onto their individualized plans, and making appropriate decisions about who is a good candidate for FSS requires the practitioners to invent new practices. Thus getting started means engaging in creative practice even before the practitioners have developed relationships with their clients.

Policymakers could have predicted that FSS enrollment would be challenging. Evaluations of demonstration programs that predated FSS evidenced that recruitment was slower than
anticipated and surmised that it would be considerably more difficult in the absence of the housing voucher as an incentive for enrollment (Frees et al 1994). Previous research on FSS and similar programs confirms this prediction and evidences that low participation levels are attributable to the limited incentive effect of the escrow account, clients' misunderstandings about the program's benefits and requirements, and housing agency directors' lack of commitment to the program rather than insufficient effort on the part of the practitioners (Rohe 1995; Rohe and Kleit 1997, 1999; Sard 2000). Indeed, enrollment was slow even in the JobsPlus demonstration where considerable support of directors, paid resident outreach workers, and the advantages of a site-based program made meeting the expectations more feasible (Miller and Riccio 2002; Gardenshire-Crooks et al 2004).

Despite the Department of Housing and Community Development's (DHCD) commitment to FSS (echoed among some of the regional nonprofits), the challenge of FSS enrollment was pronounced among the Massachusetts regional nonprofits as well. As Figure 3.1 shows, it took more three years for these FSS programs to reach the original state-wide enrollment target and combined participation in the eight programs did not reach the final goal of 679 participants until 1999, six years after the first agencies had begun recruiting efforts. In fact some agencies have yet to meet their minimum program size. (See Figure 3.2 and Table 3.1.) Moreover, the struggle to recruit participants was ongoing. In addition to the increase in the targets, participants' graduation and termination meant that practitioners needed to continue enrolling in order to maintain program size.¹ (See Figures 3.3 and 3.4.)

To underscore the extent of the challenge of FSS enrollment, JOBLink practitioners in the same nonprofits met their enrollment target of nearly three times that of FSS within the first 16 months of operation. In contrast to their FSS counterparts, the JOBLink practitioners had the advantages of the substantially more attractive incentive of the housing voucher as part of the design, the familiarity of eligibility criteria that were similar to those of the regular Section 8 program, and the support of welfare offices, homeless programs, and the entire Section 8 staff and senior management to assist in the endeavor. Whereas meeting the expectations for JOBLink enrollment proved to be a practical problem addressed with the resources available to the practitioners, their agencies, and their partners, in FSS it entailed addressing a practice problem.

¹ In 1998, HUD changed the regulations to allow housing agencies to reduce their minimum program size in proportion to the number of participants who successfully completed the program. DHCD elected not to reduce its commitment and maintained the minimum size of 679 participants.
This chapter investigates the Massachusetts regional nonprofit FSS practitioners' efforts to meet the high expectations for program enrollment in the face of these challenges. The historical narrative over the first decade of FSS practice describes how the practitioners strive to improve their enrollment practices as well as their attempts to change the organizational and policy contexts in which they operate. To make sense of these efforts as my first exploration of the feasibility of the practice of street-level creativity, I examine how the practitioners interpreted the practice problem and how their understanding of the problem evolved over time. I explore how they made use of the limited resources available for crafting creative enrollment practices and I look at how they attempted to enlist the cooperation of other system actors in the absence of a clear nexus between programs. The story also reveals how developments in the policy environment influenced the challenge of enrollment and the feasibility of creative responses. And I examine how participation in the meetings of the community of practice shaped the practitioners' responses, both as individuals working in their separate implementation environments and as a group working collectively.

Given the paucity of resources for applying the strategies of creative practice, it is not surprising that this is largely a story of effort rather than accomplishment. The practitioners eventually did reach the enrollment targets, and for a time, they even surpassed the state-wide goal. However, the practitioners' attempts to grapple with the challenge of meeting the enrollment expectations – both individually and collectively as a community of practice – did not always lead to obvious improvements in enrollment rates. In fact, many of these efforts were outright failures or were aborted when further investment no longer appeared likely to pay off.

Starting the empirical part of this inquiry with an account of struggle rather than a series of successes serves my purposes well for several reasons. It surfaces the obstacles the practitioners encounter as they strive to enact their theories-in-use and employ the strategies for crafting novel approaches to improving program operations. It illuminates the friction within the practitioner discussion forum that constrains its functioning as a venue for problem solving, solution generating, and legitimating deliberation among peers. And in exposing these challenges, the story of struggle registers forum members' commitment and perseverance as well as their natural susceptibility to discouragement and frustration in the wake of repeated failure and in the absence of external recognition or encouragement.
3.1 Four Phases of the Practitioners’ Efforts to Enroll FSS Participants

The story of FSS enrollment seen through the lens of the practitioners’ discussion forum unfolds in four phases, demarcated by the rises and falls in the statewide FSS enrollment numbers described above and the turning points in the forum’s attention to the enrollment challenge. The first phase begins with the inception of the practitioner discussion forum among the Massachusetts regional nonprofits in October of 1994 and captures the initial attempts to recruit participants. The account of the discussion in this phase gives voice to the practitioners’ initial theories-in-use about the enrollment challenge and what effective outreach requires.

The second phase covers the intervening years between the group’s achievement of its first enrollment target at the end of 1997 and the onset of the JobLink program at the beginning of the year 2000. This phase marks relative silence on enrollment issues in the practitioner discussion forum as the discussion format changes and the group’s attention turns elsewhere. The third phase recounts a series of discussions in the period from May to December of 2000, the period of most active JOBLink recruitment. I reproduce several excerpts from the forum discussions during this period that raised the issue of internal communication between the self-sufficiency staff and eligibility workers in the regular Section 8 program. These heated discussions also surfaced questions about what is appropriate discourse and behavior in the forum and point to the tensions between the practitioners’ community of practice and other influential actors.

The fourth phase documents how the forum members reactivated their collective memory of enrollment practices and how they seek to refine their theories-in-use about appropriate selection of FSS participants as pressures to recruit diminish. A short epilogue points to effects of the uncertain policy environment and changes in the format of the FSS forum on discussions about enrollment.

In each phase of this historical narrative, my objective is to illuminate the practitioners’ responses to the enrollment challenge, both as individuals and as a group. I seek to understand their efforts to meet the enrollment targets and their perspectives on how well they are succeeding in doing so rather than substantiate causal claims about why the enrollment numbers rise and fall.

I conclude the chapter with a preliminary analysis of the feasibility of creative street-level practice when there is not much latent potential to work with and in the absence of supports from other system actors. I suggest that the forums have the potential to help yet this help is limited.
when discourse is constrained, when differences across agencies and departments preclude adopting one another's creative practices, and when other concerns compete for the group's attention.

As the story of getting the program started spans the life of the forum from its inception to the end of the study period, this chapter also aims to explicate how practitioner discussion forums operate more generally. In the final discussion section, I posit an initial characterization of the forums' contributions to the pursuit of creative practice and the sustainability of this practice over time. This analysis of the nonprofit FSS practitioners' discussion group forms the basis for further elaboration in the comparisons across the three forums and their responses to other practice problems in subsequent chapters. Equally important to this inquiry is the emergence of the forum as a community of practice, a community that fosters learning and sustains each member's efforts as well as a community that acts collectively in pursuit of mutual goals.

Table 3.1 FSS and JOBLink Enrollment Across the MNPHA Agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Minimum Program Size (1996)</th>
<th>FSS % of Minimum Size Enrolled by 2000</th>
<th>JobLink % of Minimum Size Enrolled by 2003</th>
<th>FSS and JobLink % of all JL participants enrolled in FSS by 2003</th>
<th>FSS and JobLink % of new FSS participants enrolled in JL by 2003</th>
<th>FSS and JobLink % of new FSS participants enrolled in JL by 2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BHSI*</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>144%</td>
<td>184%</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTI</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAC*</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAP</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBHP</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>145%</td>
<td>841</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RHI</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>110%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMOC*</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>103%</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSHDC</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>109%</td>
<td>112%</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total DHCD</td>
<td>671</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>111%</td>
<td>2466</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Agencies where the same practitioner is responsible for both FSS and JOBLink

The First Phase: Getting Started (1994-1996)

By October 14, 1994, when the FSS Sub-Committee first convened, most of the eight agencies had moved from the challenge of getting staffed to the challenge of getting started. Until that point, most of the FSS programs were being administered by either the Rental
Assistance director or by a member of the Rental Assistance administrative staff who took on responsibilities for the program in addition to their regular workload. Six of the agencies were now staffed by practitioners specifically dedicated to the FSS program, two part-time and the rest full time. By spring of that year, all eight agencies had hired FSS staff.

Reflecting back on that time period, one mid-level manager recalled that the impetus for the sub-committee was the realization that each of the practitioners charged with carrying out the program faced the same set of challenges and frustrations. The impetus for the creation of the forum was also based on the recognition that FSS practitioners were launching a new program that was unlike any of the other programs in the leased housing departments and for most, the service rather than housing orientation was entirely new to their agencies. Moreover, many of the practitioners were doing so without a lot of support from their colleagues or supervisors, often in addition to other responsibilities. In her words, “The general consensus was that a lot of the agencies weren’t buying into it because there was no money attached to it. Plus it was a shift in what services we provided; case management was not what we had done in the past.” Despite the novelty of the FSS program and the lack of organizational commitment to the program, all eight of the agencies had already begun enrolling participants by the time of the first meeting of the practitioner discussion forum. As Figure 3.1 illustrates, this start-up phase naturally marked a steep and steady increase in FSS participants.

**Getting Situated:** The practitioners’ minutes and notes indicate that efforts to reach enrollment targets were discussed in virtually every meeting of the nonprofit’s FSS forum through January 1996. The minutes reflect that discussion, often in response to colleagues’ expressions of frustrations during the round of individual updates that kicked off each meeting rather than scheduled agenda items.\(^2\) In the course of these discussions, practitioners offered explanations for the difficulty of recruiting clients and completing the enrollment process. They also shared suggestions about approaches they had attempted.

**Sharing Enrollment Practices That Work:** The minutes from the first year of forum meetings are filled with the accounts of the practices they developed to fill in the gaps between the official policy directives and the demands of FSS practice. The two most frequently

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\(^2\) Other frequent topics discussed in these early meetings included the challenge of linking clients to the services they needed to carry out their career building plans (the subject of Chapters 4 and 5), the difficulty of maintaining ongoing connections with the clients when their motivation to carry out their plans flags (the subject of Chapter 6), and frustrations about the lack of time to devote to the program due to additional obligations (discussed below).
mentioned topics in that first year were outreach to prospective participants and conducting the needs assessment for delineating contract goals and developing the Individual Training and Services Plan (ITSP) – the sequential steps of the FSS enrollment process.

In the first few meetings, the practitioners with more experience in social service work explained their practice for assessing clients’ service needs and brought in the assessment tools they had devised for the purpose. Forum members’ used their combined experience together with guidance from the forum Chair (whose graduate degree and decades of previous experience in various the social service field gave him advantages the street-level practitioners lacked) to formulate a self-administered needs assessment questionnaire and an interview protocol for the first, intensive one-on-one meeting with clients. When first introduced, these assessment tools constituted creative street-level practices; they were inventions that did not exist previously. Eventually, the tools became part of standard practices in each of the agencies. Years later, most of the practitioners are still using them, or adapted version of them, even when several generations separate them from the original participants in the forum.

Compared to needs assessment and goal setting, recruiting clients to sign up for the program seems simple. Nevertheless, the challenge of client outreach was the subject of more sustained attention in the forum. Initially, each of the marketing strategies shared in the meetings were extensions of existing procedures of the regular Section 8 repertoire. Giving presentations on FSS at the “issuance briefings” held for all new subsidy holders to inform them of HUD regulations was one common approach. Inclusion of fliers and FSS applications forms in the materials distributed to new tenants and mass mailings to the tenant portfolio sent together with agency notices about upcoming annual recertifications or other official announcements also became standard practice among all forum members.

These practices became standard operating practice for all forum members; each agency had nearly identical procedures on which the FSS practitioners could hitch these marketing strategies. However, they did not prove sufficient for generating enough interest in FSS to meet the enrollment targets. The practitioners observed that new tenants are often too overwhelmed with finding apartments and getting their families set up in their new homes to absorb the information about FSS. As one practitioner latter characterized this phenomenon, “They are like deer in the headlights; they’re blinded by the number of things they have to worry about.” Reflections during the round of updates in the meetings indicated that the mass mailings did not
yield many responses. For example, only eight people responded to SMOC’s mailing to 210 Section 8 clients in August of 1995. The practitioners acknowledged that a response rate of less than four percent would certainly not be sufficient to meet the enrollment quotas, especially given that only a fraction of those expressing initial interest actually complete contracts of participation. Nevertheless, recognizing that the low response was not a unique experience helped affirm that the struggle to reach the quotas was not due to their own inadequacy but to the limitations of what they had to work with. They also noted that some people need to hear about the program several times before the message of its advantages sinks in.

In subsequent meetings, the practitioners shared their efforts to make these strategies more effective. They exchanged examples of their fliers, brochures, and posters to give one another suggestions for compelling graphics and wording as well as other strategies for making these outreach techniques more effective. For example, one member described the hot pink reply cards she added to a routine mass mailing to the agency’s Section 8 tenants and another recounted how she persuaded a local firm to donate the graphic design and printing for an FSS brochure. Yet another showed the group the t-shirts she designed with the “Dare to Dream” slogan she devised for all her FSS promotional materials and arranged for the practitioners to order shirts for their staff and clients. To further develop these skills, the practitioners devoted one session of the forum to a self-led graphics workshop.

Revising Theories-In-Use About Effective Enrollment: Despite these efforts, six months after the forum first convened, the practitioners realized that they needed even more creative strategies. By the April 12, 1995 meeting, 179 participants were enrolled in the MNPHA FSS programs, well more than double what it had been when the forum was established. However, because DHCD had been allocated additional Section 8 subsidies, the quotas for FSS enrollment had gone up. According to the target practitioners had discussed in their October 1994 meeting, they were 57% of the way there, but they had reached only 26% of the new goal.3

During this meeting, the practitioners proposed an additional explanation for the reluctance to sign up for FSS; misinformation had been raising concerns among prospective applicants that they would lose their housing subsidy if they were to fail to achieve the goals within five years. The practitioners noted that they were now making a point of clarifying that none of the FSS

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3 These figures are based on my calculations of reports in the meeting minutes. There is a small discrepancy between these numbers and those reported in the annual reports.
Figure 3.1 FSS Participants in the Massachusetts Nonprofits

Figure 3.2 FSS Enrollment Rates Across MNPHA Agencies (1997-2005)
(Percentage of Minimum Program Size)
Figure 3.3  Graduations, Terminations, and Entering Escrow Status

Figure 3.4  Estimated New FSS Participants
programs in Massachusetts require participants to relinquish their housing vouchers. What they also learned from this common experience is that the informal grape vine is an effective conduit for getting program information out to a wide audience. The practitioners recognized that for word of mouth to result in a steady stream of FSS applicants, available information about the program would not only need to be accurate; a critical mass of participants would be necessary to spread the good news about the benefits of participation. By the end of that April meeting, the forum members clearly endorsed the theory-in-use that face-to-face contact is the most effective way to attract FSS applicants. However, the FSS practitioners had few opportunities to meet with prospective clients other than the issuance briefings attended by scores of prospective tenants who were absorbed with finding new homes in the state’s tight rental market.

Tina described how contacts with her colleagues in service providing agencies throughout the Berkshires helped in her recruitment efforts. Yet this practice proved to be difficult for Tina’s peers to replicate in their own service areas. For one, the service providers in Tina’s area had cultivated practices of informal exchanges across program boundaries to create a climate particularly conducive to coordination. As I discuss in greater depth in the following chapter, this climate was not characteristic of most of the eight regions in the state. Secondly, as the primary Section 8 administrator in the region and the only agency with an FSS program, Tina’s agency was the only logical referent for prospective FSS participants.

Janine’s efforts are evidence of the challenge of adopting Tina’s practice in other areas. She told the group about her displays of her newly designed FSS brochures in local public libraries and the calls she received following media coverage of her recognition dinner for FSS participants who had begun to achieve their self-sufficiency goals. However, many of those who expressed interest did not have Section 8 vouchers or received their subsidies through the other HAs on the South Shore and thus could not enroll in Janine’s program.

Given the constraints of the other recruitment strategies, internal referrals from co-workers in the regular Section 8 departments emerged as the preferred strategy for applying the theory-in-use of personal contact as the key to recruitment. As early as the second meeting of the sub-committee, three practitioners told their peers that working directly with the other staff of the leased housing departments -- known as “Program Reps” -- was more effective than any other recruitment effort. The Reps meet with tenants at least once a year as they reassess their eligibility for housing assistance and re-calculate their share of the rent. These meetings thus
provide the face-to-face contact that, according to the FSS theory-in-use, is key to clarifying the benefits of FSS and persuading tenants to enroll. The July 19, 1995 minutes express this conviction:

Rachelle cited the importance of the Program Reps who actively market the program during their contacts with clients, her immediate follow through on such referrals, and her ability to make things as convenient as possible for the potential participants, including visiting them in their homes and helping in whatever way possible.

Gaining the commitments from the Program Reps required concerted effort on the part of the FSS practitioners, especially in agencies where self-sufficiency was not widely endorsed as relevant to the mission. Even where Program Reps expressed enthusiasm for FSS, they stressed that their high caseloads left them only ten to fifteen minutes to cover an already extensive and high scripted interview protocol with each client; opening up yet another topic could put a whole day behind schedule. Some practitioners were able to overcome that resistance to cooperation.

In the same meeting, Tina conveyed that her co-workers began referring prospective clients only after she had interacted with them on a regular basis. Her work with the agency’s elderly population and recent assumption of responsibility for tenant-landlord mediation enhanced her relationships with other workers, even if the additional roles consumed time she might otherwise have devoted to FSS case management.

The forum meetings occasioned sharing additional ideas for improving communication with the Program Reps and persuade them to let their clients know about FSS. Many found that attending team meetings and telling stories of clients’ recent successes in informal conversations helped foster more of a commitment to FSS. Janine reported a surge in FSS applications after she sent an intern to conduct a survey with the housing inspectors. She learned that inspectors’ interactions with tenants in their homes offer a more relaxed atmosphere for talking about life goals and the advantages of FSS. However, like the Program Reps, the routine physical inspections are highly regimented and confined by tight time schedules. Free from those constraints, the intern was able to engage prospective participants in discussion while also collecting information about how to tailor future program developments. In the absence of interns, Janine’s peers were unable to replicate her arrangement. They nevertheless affirmed commitment to internal referrals as the strategy of choice.

Consensus about internal referrals emerged through the test of what works in practice, confirmed by the practitioners’ knowledge-in-use rather than more systematic tracking. The
principal proponents of the strategy were those who had succeeded at recruiting the largest numbers of participants. Several years later, one practitioner’s rare effort to quantify the practitioners’ assessment of effective techniques confirmed these more intuitive assessments. Looking back over referrals made since the inception of her agency’s program in 1993, she found that internal referrals were the most frequent source of new clients after the initial mass mailing to the entire Section 8 portfolio at the very beginning of the program.

**Collective Efforts to Change State Welfare Policy:** Another recruitment strategy discussed in the early meetings involved targeting current welfare recipients. Theoretically, tenants who are not currently working or those whose low wages require them to supplement income with welfare assistance are opportune candidates for FSS because they stand to benefit from case management assistance to prepare themselves to enter the labor force and because once they find stable, well-paying work, their low base income will afford substantial escrowing potential. In fact, the welfare population was among HUD’s priority targets for the program (Rohe and Kleit 1999; Kadurri and Shroder 2003; Sard 2003).

However, meeting minutes reflect the practitioners’ concern that this logic did not universally apply to all households who rely on welfare because some are not physically or otherwise able to work. They also acknowledged that welfare recipients would require more intensive case management, especially if they had little prior work experience. The minutes also reflect the challenge of identifying these FSS candidates from the rest of their agency’s Section 8 portfolio. For those who had access to their agency’s main data base -- such as MBHP and RHI who were among the larger agencies with savvy and accessible computer technicians -- selective mailings were easy to produce.4 At the time, however, most FSS practitioners had no means to tailor their search on their own.

The practitioners were also aware of the potential impact of the pending state welfare reform on their recruitment efforts. Minutes from the December 1994 meeting noted that implementation of the newly legislated state welfare reform was “something for us to watch closely.” The practitioners formed a “Legislative Sub-Group” to investigate the implications of the legislation for FSS and to draft a position paper for circulation among state-level decision makers. At the June 1995 meeting just prior to the July 1st welfare reform implementation date,

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4 In several agencies, the possibility of identifying welfare recipients emerged only at a later date. For example, SMOC began compiling addresses to invite welfare recipients to a recruitment session in September of 1996.

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practitioners predicted that the state's work-first policy would have a negative impact on FSS recruitment. They surmised that without the extended income support of the previous welfare policy, longer-term strategies that entailed acquiring college degrees or more intensive professional certificates would be prohibitively challenging for many participants. Not only did curtailing pursuit of education run counter to their understanding of the goals of the FSS program, the welfare reforms targeted those who otherwise stood to gain the most from the escrow incentive as discussed above.

The group's position paper on the impact of welfare reform on FSS was complete by late July of 1995. The paper conveyed that a considerable proportion of FSS participants were relying on welfare assistance to support their families while they were pursuing their self-sufficiency goals.\(^5\) It highlighted the value of welfare assistance to FSS participants as well as the need for additional transportation, childcare, and training resources. They arranged a discussion with DHCD officials and later with state-level welfare agency representatives to learn more about the intended changes and to voice their concerns. Each practitioner took responsibility for preparing a different aspect of the paper and the oral presentation. As a result of these efforts, the practitioners gained greater clarity about the new procedures, the process of requesting waivers from the work requirements, and details about application for existing in-kind assistance programs.

These meetings were also influential in convincing the welfare department to designate childcare vouchers especially for FSS participants who would not otherwise be eligible for assistance, as I discuss in the following chapter on coordination with external partners. However, the practitioners were not successful in exacting waivers from time limits or work requirements for FSS participants pursuing intensive educational programs, a proposal they hoped would encourage more welfare recipients to enroll in the program as well as improve their chances for success once enrolled.

A year after these efforts, the group tried raising these concerns to decision makers in the housing policy arena. In their list of recommendations for DHCD to include in the executive summary of their annual report to HUD, the practitioners listed suggestions for resolving the

\(^5\) The paper's estimate that 75% to 95% of FSS participants were receiving AFDC was probably an overstatement. MBHP's administrative data suggests proportions of welfare-reliant FSS participants more in line with Rohe and Kleit's (1999) survey that showed 48% of FSS participants received AFDC subsidies. In 1993, 65% of MBHP's FSS participants received AFDC, a figure that had declined to 16% by 1997 (Herranz 1999).
conflicting goals of FSS and the work-first strategy. They suggested that DHCD and HUD “market FSS to welfare departments from the top down.” Such inter-departmental coordination between HUD and HSS and DHCD and its state-level counterparts was not customary at that time. Indeed, as I noted in the discussion of the housing-based self-sufficiency program designs in the previous chapter, formal federal and state-level partnerships between housing and other social services were rare until the Welfare-to-Work Voucher Program.

The practitioners’ efforts to advocate for changes in welfare policy evidences their motivation to take pro-active steps towards addressing externally imposed challenges that are well beyond the scope of their discretion over their own programmatic responsibilities. Yet their capacity to influence state and federal decision makers proved insufficient and resulted in frustration rather than triumph. The minutes of the January 18, 1996 meeting reflect forum members’ uncertainty about their capacity to do enough to improve the program.

At this point in the meeting it was clear that many of us were feeling uneasy, anxious, (and) insecure about the issues affecting [DHCD], HUD, DTA, from government re-organization to funding cuts. How do we continue to energize our clients and advocate for the FSS program when the ground beneath us feels shaky?

Deliberations About Advocating for Changes to FSS Regulations: The frustrations over welfare reform advocacy did not, however, prevent forum members from strategizing about other programmatic changes. In earlier meetings, the practitioners shared observations that Section 8 tenants who are already employed frequently expressed initial interest in guided career development and asset building yet declined to sign up for FSS once they realized how difficult it would be for them to benefit from the escrow accounts. In that same January 1996 meeting, the practitioners raised the possibility of amending the regulations for the FSS escrow account so that even those who did not substantially increase their earned income over the course of the five-year contract would be able to accrue savings. However, the minutes do not include any specific suggestions for an alternative formula for escrow accumulation or a strategy for approaching HUD with a proposed amendment to the regulations.

The practitioners also raised and rejected the possibility of requesting a waiver from HUD to mandate FSS participation for all Section 8 tenants as a means to boost enrollment and streamline the application process by integrating it with established Section 8 procedures. This idea was promptly rejected. Practitioners pointed to the importance of the voluntary nature of the program, a point that would be raised again in response to the suggestion that all JOBLink
participants be required to enroll in FSS. Others raised concerns about the impact on their caseloads and the subsequent effect on their capacity to deliver quality case management.

The decision not to pursue either of these regulatory changes may have been due to the practitioners’ assessment that they did not have the power to influence what would have been a major change in federal regulations with potentially substantial budgetary implications. At the same time, the disinclination to further explore this strategy may reflect the practitioners’ priorities about the program goals. Throughout my research, I heard practitioners reassure one another of the value of case management even if the participants do not accumulate savings. Practitioners have also expressed frustration that HUD’s evaluation of program success over-emphasizes escrow accumulation over other forms of progress towards self-sufficiency and improved quality of life. For example, as Sherry expressed her frustration with policymakers at HUD, “They always want to know about ‘the numbers.’ That’s not what I care about. I care about the people, getting them what they want and seeing them get ahead.” In fact, Sherry and her peers in the nonprofit FSS staff customarily supplement their annual reports to HUD with stories of participants’ achievements in other areas of their lives in addition to increases in income.

**Collective Efforts to Revise DHCD Administrative Structures:** The FSS practitioners’ collective efforts to influence DHCD’s decisions makers were more successful than their attempts to change state welfare policy or their considered changes to HUD’s FSS designs. During the first years of FSS implementation, an additional practice problem had emerged that exacerbated the enrollment challenge for several of the agencies. The new allocations of Section 8 subsidies had raised the targeted program sizes to levels that, for many of the nonprofit programs, made meeting the expectations unrealistic. Indeed, in the July 19, 1995 meeting, SMOC’s FSS coordinator expressed despair over the possibility of ever recruiting their new program target. This new target marked a substantial increase in SMOC’s FSS obligation since December of the previous year – from 57 to 90 – and was triple the size of the agency’s original target of 30 families. The fact that the agency administered the smallest voucher portfolio of the eight regional nonprofits made this increase even more daunting; recruitment would need to be
aggressive in order to reach the required level of saturation.\textsuperscript{6} Other agencies were also burdened with challenging increases at that time. For example, SSHDC’s minimum program size was magnified over five and a half fold in this time, an increase that was mitigated by the agency’s relatively large pool of Section 8 families from which to recruit future FSS participants. Other agencies also doubled or tripled their program sizes while two remained at the 1994 levels. (See Table 3.1.)

The practitioners’ first step to address this aspect of the enrollment challenge was to inform the Rental Assistance Committee (RAC) about the problem. On July 22, 1996 the forum Chair sent a formal memo to the RAC urging the Rental Assistance directors to request that HUD grant them more time to fill the FSS slots. The memo stressed the need to investigate the “context of the bigger picture and obstacles, consequences, and risks” associated with the challenge of meeting the targets. In September of that year, the practitioners met with members of the RAC to suggest a more immediate solution based on their assessments of what was practical and fair for FSS practice across the nonprofit agencies. They proposed that the FSS obligation be reapportioned in relation to each agency’s capacity to recruit participants instead of the number of new rental subsidies each had received. This request was passed on to the committee of Executive Directors of each of the regional nonprofits who then persuaded DHCD to make the adjustments. In this case, the channels of communication along the hierarchy within the subsidized housing system served the FSS practitioners well. Their voices not only eventually reached those with the authority to make the changes; they actually resulted in amendments to official regulations.

The FSS practitioners were less successful in seeking resolution to the challenges of inadequate staffing for the program. The practitioner discussion forum was a venue for venting about the lack of time to devote to participant recruitment and the needs of their current clientele because they were being asked to take on additional obligations not related to FSS. In the aforementioned July 1996 list of recommendations for DHCD to submit to HUD, the practitioners included the suggestion that administrative funding for the program should be expanded to provide adequate staffing for recommended case levels and that funding should be related to program size.

\textsuperscript{6} Estimates based on 2002 the agency’s administrative data for the entire Section 8 portfolio indicate that SMOC’s April 1995 increase put the percentage of required FSS participation at 17% of the entire family portfolio. The average for the MNPHA agencies hovered around six percent for most of the study period.
While the influence of the Massachusetts practitioners' recommendations is impossible to trace, HUD did eventually authorize additional funding, a considerable time after the practitioners' initial recommendation. In FY 2000, DHCD responded to HUD's notice of expanded funding for program staffing and increased allocations to each of the nonprofits in relation to the size of their FSS programs. In the meantime, each agency found its own approach to managing the caseloads. Some found other sources of funding to supplement FSS staffing. For example, MBHP, the largest of the agencies with the comparably largest quota for FSS participants, committed to hiring a staff of six to work on the program. Although, MBHP ultimately hired only three "Family Advocates", as the case management position was initially called, and a self-sufficiency manager, this investment in the program contrasts with other agencies who maintained staff size at the original level and continued to require FSS staff to take on additional tasks. Indeed, staff-overloading was among the reasons for the high turnover at CTI which persistently had the lowest enrollment rates.

The forum did not issue a collective request to the Directors for additional staffing as they did with respect to the redistribution of required FSS slots. One explanation for this relatively passive response is the recognition that the agencies did not share the same degree of pressure to meet the FSS obligations. Differences in directors' perception of how the self-sufficiency goals enhanced their agency's mission overall were only one factor. In addition, while the association of regional nonprofits works collectively on some issues of common concern, each agency engage in separate negotiations with DHCD over their portion of the state's HUD allocations. The FSS portion of their budget was thus subject to individual debates with DHCD. In fact, even after DHCD increased allocations for FSS staff, some agencies were reluctant to direct these funds accordingly. As became clear in the discussions later in this history of the nonprofit FSS forum's enrollment efforts, although the RAC was a valuable channel of communication to the member agencies and along the hierarchy to DHCD and HUD, it proved to be a less willing partner for addressing the practitioners' struggles with practice problems internal to their agencies.

**Collective Efforts for FSS Outreach:** In addition to voicing their concerns and creative ideas to those with greater decision making authority, the FSS forum members sought to take

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7 Differences in the degree of competition with other housing agencies for contract renewal also influences the bargaining power with DHCD and the degree to which the agencies are likely to invest in FSS in order to increase the likelihood of renewal.
advantage of their combined resources to devise novel approaches to recruiting FSS clients
during this start-up phase. In the winter of 1995, the group learned that an FSS program in San
Diego had produced a video to describe the program and explain its value to prospective clients,
other service providers, and the broader community. A task force was formed to hone the idea.

In between forum-wide meetings, the practitioners faxed one another suggestions for their
“fantasy videos” and possible story lines. One of the practitioners took the lead in writing the
script based on an outline developed collectively. The theme that emerged was, “Everybody
everywhere needs support.” The video was to begin by establishing the universal need for help
and encouragement and how the concept of “support” fits the self-sufficiency philosophy. It
would then show how each of the nonprofit agencies is carrying out the program and suggest
ways individuals and organizations can get involved with the program. The video would
conclude by reinforcing the message that helping low-income families reach their goals is
valuable for the entire community and that assistance from other organizations and community
members is essential for its success.

The practitioners wanted the film to offer its audience a realistic view of the obstacles FSS
participants face. In particular, they aimed to highlight the challenges the Massachusetts welfare
reform package posed for pursuing educational opportunities. This conception contrasted with
the San Diego model, which the group criticized as being “too housing authority and western
flavored.” The Massachusetts video would be more advocacy-oriented and would be used as a
fundraising tool in addition to a means for clarifying program details for the purpose of
recruiting participants and more effective inter-agency coordination.

Although the practitioners had no discretionary budget and no experience working together
as a team apart from their concurrent efforts to advocate for changes in state welfare policy,
forum members drew upon their collective experience, connections, networking skills, and
diverse clientele as resources for producing the video. Their ideas about what is likely to
resonate with their diverse audiences and the mix of their clients’ personal stories that
represented the full range of the state’s racial and ethnic diversity and different stages of progress
towards meeting the self-sufficiency goals were among these resources. They leveraged the
group’s structural relationship within the subsidized housing system to access funding, first by
appealing to the RAC and then, when the RAC declined their request, succeeded to persuade
DHCD to finance the project. Forum members’ personal and professional ties supplied a list of
prospective videographers, mostly from the faculty of communications departments in colleges throughout the area.

Perhaps most importantly, the practitioners’ persistence proved essential to furthering the project. Just as accessing funding required repeated requests, securing the services of a videographer required repeated cycles of interviews, and preliminary agreements, followed by discontinued communication before they closed a deal. Convincing the RAC that devoting time to the endeavor was worthwhile also required persistence, at first for the initial time-bound endorsement of the endeavor and then for repeated extensions over the following years of delays. While waiting to hear from less than enthusiastic partners required patience, the practitioners’ own responsibilities for attending training on interviewing and editing, selecting the clients, obtaining requisite release forms, and conducting preliminary interviews required more perseverance than several of the practitioners could deliver. The unreturned phone calls and e-mails from the videographer led to voices of frustration in the months and then years of meeting minutes. As a result, several of the practitioners abandoned their preparations before filming began.

Ultimately, in the May 2000 meeting, almost five years after the idea was first discussed, the practitioners’ capacity for perseverance ran out. In the absence of encouragement from the RAC, DHCD, or any other audience, the momentum of their own intrinsic motivation dissipated. Moreover, by then the practitioner Rachelle who had taken the lead in the initiative had left the FSS forum to take on the JOBLink and Moving to Work programs in her agency. She was available to help those who remained in the group, but her enthusiasm was redirected to other endeavors. The forum members made a formal decision to abort the project. They would make one last attempt to retrieve their materials from the professor. As Janine put it, “It’s our history.” Indeed, this history continued to resonate as the forum’s collective inner voice of pessimism. Memories of the failure to produce the video were recalled each time discussion turned to ideas for collective action.

Nevertheless, the history of the video points to the feasibility of creative street-level practice. It suggests that were circumstances more conducive to translating their creative ideas, relationships, experience, and commitment into practice, this novel approach to convert clients, partners, and policy makers into FSS enthusiasts, the efforts might have succeeded. In fact, the effort did spawn such a success for one of the forum members.
While the video task force was coping with frustrated communication with the videographer, Janine convinced her agency – one of those most committed to the self-sufficiency agenda -- to pay for her to attend a video production course at a local cable station. She completed a video of her own FSS program in July of 1999 that is now shown at agency events to recruit potential clients and as a motivational devise at peer support group meetings of FSS participants. Janine also showed the video at the 2001 FSS retreat as part of the theme of building self-esteem discussed in Chapter 4 on motivating clients.

**Street-Level Creativity and the Challenge of Getting Started:** The story of this long start-up phase evidences how hard it is to get started on several levels. Getting started with FSS proved hard for clients, the practitioners, and the forum as a collective. Each of these actors encountered set backs and practice problems due to the program designs, the policy environment, and lack of support from partners along the hierarchy and across organizational and policy boundaries. However, despite the setbacks and frustrations, the practitioners’ efforts seem to have paid off. FSS enrollments among the Massachusetts nonprofits had climbed to 311 by September of 1996. Although this number was still far short of the new target, it amounted to 99% of the one discussed in the first meeting of the forum.

Nevertheless, the early experiences of the forum and its members provide some evidence that creative street-level practice is feasible. While much of the enrollment is surely due to the program designs themselves, the incentives of the escrow account and case management were not in themselves sufficient. The practitioners’ efforts to develop and improve upon their outreach and enrollment practices were influential, at least to some extent and according to their own assessments. The degree of novelty these practices entailed is subtle to an outsider, but are nevertheless a marked difference from having no recruitment and needs assessment strategies at all. The practitioners developed these new practices – many of which remain essential to the MNPHA FSS practitioners’ repertoire today – by exploiting the little latent potential they had to work with. The practitioners’ combined expertise and experience were the primary resources for developing the needs assessment tools. The existing routines Section 8 procedures and organizational routines and structures were the most fundamental building blocks for the recruitment strategies. Where feasible, some practitioners and the forum as a whole also tapped relationships with colleagues inside and outside their organizations. The practitioners
perseverance and intrinsic motivation also proved to be a vital – if not entirely self-regenerating--resource.

Even the practitioners’ failures are suggestive of the feasibility of creative street-level practice if circumstances were different. Forum members’ efforts to understand and address the practice problems contrast with the observed experiences of their counterparts on the frontlines of other social service agencies. They did not merely resign themselves to the limitations of inadequate program technologies and impossible to reach goals. The practitioners’ conclusion that changing HUD’s escrow regulations or securing additional staff funding was beyond their power and the subsequent decisions to cut their losses after it became clear that the video and welfare policy changes were not feasible were not merely rationalizations. They were responses to feedback from the environment that their initial goals were set too high. Just as they convinced DHCD to adjust the distribution of enrollment obligations in relation to each agency’s capacity, so too did the forum members adjust their own expectations of what is feasible to achieve.

This early history of the forum is also a story of discovery and development even in light of the failed attempts at producing more extensive novelty. The group established a practice of convening regularly, a clear departure from the practice of staying in the cubicles typical among frontline workers in their agencies. They instituted the rituals of the updates, created several sub-groups or task forces, and developed practices for learning from one another. Moreover, the relationships among the practitioners grew. When the group first met in October of 1994, the practitioners were strangers. Through that first year of meeting and sharing practices and frustrations, a group emerged, a group capable of acting collectively in pursuit of common goals. The minutes of the first meeting reflected an aggregate of FSS practitioners from across the state. Over the course of the first two years their memos to the RAC and state officials were expressions of a collective voice, a voice that got heard even if it did not always elicit the desired response.

The Second Phase: Shift of Attention (Fall 1996- early 2000)

By the late fall of 1996, the discussion in the meetings had shifted focus from enrolling prospective participants to concerns about other aspects of self-sufficiency practice. Enrollment figures were quickly approaching the new statewide target, thereby reducing the pressure to
recruit additional participants. By September of 1997, the group had already surpassed the total program size the practitioners set for themselves in their 1998 statement of goals submitted for approval of the RAC on July 9, 1997. Overall enrollment had increased to 618 participants or 92% of the required program size by the time the group submitted its 1998 annual report to HUD. (See Figure 3.1.)

The enrollment process continued to be challenging, especially for those practitioners who did not have partners to help them with the process. Indeed, a few of the agencies were still substantially well below their enrollment targets, even after the reapportionment of program sizes across the agencies. However, the fact that the forum members had articulated a theory-in-use for effective recruiting and had developed a technology for assessing clients’ needs, clarified the necessary steps of the enrollment process. In addition, as the program participants were advancing beyond the initial stages of goal setting and developing service plans, new challenges were at the forefront of the practitioners’ minds. More participants were entering into escrow status, graduating from the program, or facing termination for failing to be engaged in programmatic obligations. (See Figure 3.3.) Each of these client activities posed new challenges for self-sufficiency practice. Consequently, throughout the remainder of 1996 and through the beginning of 2000, forum discussions were dedicated to aspects of self-sufficiency practice other than enrollment.

Another reason for the declining attention to the challenges of enrolling clients in FSS derives from changes in the forum’s own practices. In the fall of 1996, the group decided to abandon the custom of sharing individual program updates at the start of each meeting and – in the interest of devoting more time to focused discussion of the many joint projects underway – each practitioner agreed to submit written reports on “the numbers.” Eventually, follow-through on the written reports slackened and the opportunity to voice concerns about enrollment target or to share ideas from the developing repertoire of strategies disappeared – if only temporarily.⁸

After a year without the updates, the group registered concern about the declining opportunities to share information and offer mutual support in its statement of goals for the 1998 fiscal year. However, the packed agendas of subsequent meetings did not allow much time for sharing and support. Subsequent time saving developments further constrained opportunities for

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⁸ This decline in reporting on enrollment numbers accounts for the gap in the graphs. In 1997, the collectively submitted annual reports to HUD provide the data.
informal discourse venting about frustrations and recounting of triumphs. Beginning in November of 1997 the group elected to meet bi-monthly rather than monthly to conserve travel time. For those practitioners in the more remote areas, travel to the meetings required a two-hour investment each way. At a time with mounting pressures within the agency in addition to their desire to invest time in individual program developments, the switch was a welcome relief even if they valued the time to interact with their peers.

The shift in focus to pressing collective concerns and the abandonment of individual reporting meant that those practitioners who still were struggling to recruit new participants did not have an opportunity to seek advice from their peers. As Figure 3.2 illustrates, the national enrollment rates mask considerable variation across the agencies. Moreover, by this time several of the practitioners involved in the earlier discussions about recruitment strategies had resigned their positions, some of them in frustration over the multiple roles they were required to take on in addition to their FSS responsibilities or due to agency cutbacks in staffing. Indeed, those agencies that were farthest below their target size for enrollment had experienced the greatest amount of turnover. For example, CTI – at 65-75% of its minimum program size from 1997-2000 -- hired the fifth practitioner to staff the FSS program during this period. In the absence of renewed discussion of enrollment practices and given fewer opportunities for informal exchanges among the practitioners, the newcomers had little chance to tap the collective repertoire of creative enrollment practices.

Nor was there discussion of the practice problems that some of the practitioners faced in attempting to execute the preferred strategy of engaging their leased housing counterparts in recruitment efforts. The next phase of the enrollment efforts suggests that the work of the forum in helping one another address this practice problem was not yet done.


**Pressure to Recruit Revisited:** Statewide FSS enrollment finally reached the HUD set target by 1999; the 678 participants comprised 101% of the target. By the following year, however, enrollment had dropped to 625 or 93% of the minimum. In itself, this drop was not an immediate cause for major concern; HA’s need reach only 80% of the minimum program size to receive the maximum number of SEMAP points for FSS enrollment. However, the decline marked a trend that would require the practitioners to devote more energy to recruiting new
participants than they had in the previous phase of program implementation. For one, the year 2000 was the sixth year of operation of the five-year program. It thus marked a peak in graduation; 82 participants successfully achieved their contracted goals and received the balance of their escrow funds in contrast to only 49 in the previous year, and only 25 the year before that. Secondly, practitioners had begun to terminate participants who had ceased to be actively involved in the program. Third, new participants were replacing many of those who had either graduated or were terminated from the program. Yet, as Figure 3.1 shows, the year 2000 marked the lowest point in new enrollments since 1994; only 125 enrolled that year as opposed to 155 in 1999 and 249 in 1998. Indeed, more participants left the eight FSS programs than joined them in that year, resulting in a net loss of participants for the first time since the program’s inception.

These numbers were not discussed directly in the practitioner discussion forum. As the custom of updating one another on developments in each agency had not yet resumed, practitioners were no longer reporting “their numbers” to the group.9 After the long period of silence on enrollment issues, practitioners once again began to voice concerns about declining participation.10 Understanding the reasons behind declining participation was the focus of several discussions beginning with the May 31, 2000 meeting. In contrast to the early discussions, the practitioners framed the idea of participation more comprehensively, in relation to additional aspects of FSS involvement in addition to enrollment per say. The observation that fewer were signing up for the program was intertwined with comments about how those enrolled were less enthusiastic about following through with their interim service plans or engaging in the activities the practitioners had designed to sustain their motivation to pursue their self-sufficiency goals.

The practitioners attributed this declining enthusiasm to the “changing profile” of FSS participants and potential participants. Forum members noted that they had already recruited the tenants who were most motivated to pursue career building efforts, including welfare recipients

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9 One exception was the June 23, 2000 meeting held on a Friday in Hyannis on Cape Cod to allow those who wished to enjoy the beach and perhaps spend the weekend there after the meeting. At the last minute, the sub-committee chair was unable to attend and thus the meeting took a somewhat different course than the previous ones.

10 The impact of graduations and terminations on program sizes was briefly noted for the first time since October 1996 in the March 17, 1999 meeting but not mentioned again until the following year in the March 22, 2000 meeting. In the intervening meetings, practitioners continued to share ideas for organizing graduation ceremonies and clarified regulations concerning cross agency transfers and escrow disbursements. Concerns about the declining percentage of participants accumulating escrow funds — one of HUD’s performance measures — also received attention. However, no discussions about declining program size appeared in the meeting minutes in this period.
who had responded most immediately to the time limits for assistance when they were first introduced. Stories about particular clients substantiated the group’s impression that many of those remaining in the pool of potential FSS applicants were those least interested or least able to benefit from the earned income incentive. Not only did they perceive the current clientele as comprised of large proportions of “hard core” or “harder to serve” clients; the practitioners also emphasized the paucity of services to help this group succeed as a result of the growing demand for such services and the shift in state policies to favor short-term job placement programs rather than intensive education and training programs. Both getting started and continuing the endeavor of people changing was becoming more challenging in light of welfare reform and the accompanying workforce development programs and supportive services.

**Extending and Reaffirming Theories-In-Use for FSS Recruitment:** The first agenda item of the June and August 2000 meetings framed the discussion about how to respond to these changes as “Big Picture FSS: What We Can’t Do as Individual Agencies.” The brainstorming sessions surfaced ideas for addressing the challenges of motivating current participants and augmenting the available services available to them. (The practitioners’ responses to these challenges are the topics of the next two chapters.) Yet the discussion also turned to challenges specific to client recruitment. One suggestion was to reach out to prospective participants while they were still eligible for the income supports. A practitioner from the agency serving Cape Cod told of success she had in targeting residents of her agency’s homeless shelters. Enrolling shelter residents in the FSS program once they received the housing voucher would offer them a “continuum of care” that could eventually lead them from homelessness to homeownership. However, this strategy proved difficult to replicate for her counterparts in more urban districts where the residents of transitional housing for formerly homeless people were less likely to receive a Section 8 voucher held by the same agency.

The practitioners also pointed to the possibility that JOBLink clients would provide a new group of highly motivated candidates for FSS. At the time of the August meeting, this pool of potential FSS applicants was largely unknown; only 10% of the JOBLink’s target population of 2000 residents had rental leases. Some surmised that JOBLink tenants’ status as recent welfare recipients and the fact that they had made a commitment to working meant that a large proportion would be attracted to the escrow incentive and case management assistance of FSS. Moreover, those within one year of receiving welfare benefits would still have the help of DTA
stabilization to augment FSS case management. Others were less optimistic and shared
observations that many were either already working or were so overwhelmed by their recent
moves from homeless shelters and other difficult circumstances that they would not be ready for
FSS for some time. According to what the group learned about the limits of FSS outreach before
Section 8 clients had settled in their new apartments, the challenge of finding opportunities for
apply their theory-in-use of face-to-face recruiting would be challenging in the context of
JOBLink as well.

The group entertained and rejected the idea of automatically enrolling all JOBLink
participants in FSS with some advocating standard contracts of participant to be revised once the
clients were more settled and others arguing against altering the self-selection mechanism of
voluntary enrollment. Those FSS practitioners who also held the responsibilities for operating
the JOBLink program, had the chance to engage with JOBLink clients in person. Tina and Joyce
modeled the recruitment scenario for their peers:

Tina: We need to present it (like this): “This voucher is different from the regular Section 8
in that it’s linked to a job. Let me tell you about another program that can help you make it
work to your advantage.” This would be an easier sell. But then with me, it’s the same
person (the same case management for both FSS and JL).

Joyce: I agree with Tina. I’m out here urging the people. They’re calling me for everything.
I already have the relationship. My concern is – am I going to be able to maintain this?

Tina: We need to avoid “I just got a job. Now I want to join FSS.”

However, Tina expressed that the advantage of her double role in both self-sufficiency
programs was insufficient to fulfill recruitment needs without cooperation from the regular
Section 8 staff. Although Tina was among those who had shared positive results from the
internal referral strategy, she commented that recent turnover among the Program Reps had
eroded her relationships. She suggested that the group should pressure the rental assistance
administrators to make referrals to FSS. Another practitioner echoed these frustrations and
requested help from her peers about how to persuade her co-workers in the regular Section 8
program to refer prospective FSS applicants. Before other practitioners could respond to this
request, the sub-committee chair interjected that the forum was an inappropriate venue for
discussion of practice problems that are internal to individual agencies.

Challenging Appropriateness in Forum Discussions: The following excerpts from the
meeting transcripts convey the ensuing struggle over the boundaries of appropriate discussion in
the forum and consequently, its capacity to foster the practice of street-level creativity. The first
excerpt (3.1) from the August meeting conveys the debate about the value of discussing the challenges of applying the theory-in-use of internal referrals. At the same time, it raises questions about the division of responsibility for developing the relationships with the Program Reps and the role of the community of practice in accessing support for that endeavor.

This first vignette surfaces three sets of tensions that hindered deliberation about creative solutions to the challenges of cooperation with Section 8 colleagues. One tension is between the forum as the meeting place of community of FSS practitioners and the forum in its capacity as a sub-committee of the RAC. When Sherry and Tina challenged the forum’s consensus about the internal referral strategy, Bill attempted to steer discussion away from the topic and asserted that internal agency conflicts must be worked out independently rather than in the forum. The discussion delineates the sharp lines between Directors’ responsibilities and those of the practitioners and reinforces the marginal position of FSS in the agencies. Bill’s assertions that “This is not a Directors’ meeting.” and “...they’ll think that we’re over-stepping our bounds” underscore that as street-level practitioners, the community members cannot dictate how their superiors should behave. The consequences of challenging the hierarchy are also apparent in Bill’s reluctance to avoid “getting slammed again” for stepping beyond the parameters of his own organizational position. Barbara’s reference to the relatively low status of FSS among Directors’ other priorities confirms the rift between the self-sufficiency programs and core housing programs the practitioners wish to discuss. Tina’s remarks about the difference between meeting the numbers and “getting good referrals” and the Reps’ resentment of clients who receive escrow checks further accentuate the divide between the practitioners and their Directors and FSS and other program staff.

Although Bill emphasizes the Directors’ accountability to the DHCD and HUD contract and recalls that FSS is no longer an “unfunded mandate,” he suggests that the practitioners bear the responsibility to raise their concerns with their agency supervisors and that Directors are obligated to react responsively. Whereas Sherry intimates that the group is “being reactive instead of proactive,” Bill infers that the place to be proactive is within the agency when he states, “You have to be proactive. Part of that means going to the Program Reps and letting your Directors know.” The echoes of the prior discussion about client-practitioner relations and client’s responsibilities to help themselves resonate, even if they are not acknowledged consciously. The tenor of Bill’s remarks is like that of the clients; the practitioners are expected
Excerpt 3.1: Whose Problem Is It?

(All speakers are FSS practitioners unless otherwise noted.)

Bill (sub-committee chair, and director of the Leased Housing and Fuel Assistance Division at SMOC): I'm not going to enter into that discussion because it's internal to the agencies.

Tina: Directors need to know how many Section 8 clients are going into FSS.

Bill: It's a SEMAP recording. So they should know. It only affects the total score if you're low on the numbers.

Barbara (Director of Special Programs at SSHDC, guest at meeting): Why make it an issue if you're not low on the numbers?

Bill: That's the Director's responsibility. This is not a Directors' meeting. We have a contractual obligation to DHCD.

Sherry: Why are we being reactive instead of proactive?

Bill: It's up to each of you to bring it to your directors.

Jane: It would be fair to say that timing is everything. It would be wise to form relationships that would enhance those referrals.

Bill: If this group has recommendations to the Directors' group, I will bring them to them.

Jane: Nancy (an agency director) would say use your time in staff meetings wisely. But at HAC, we're all housed in the same department (and attend department-wide and all-staff meetings regularly).

Wendy: I think it is a good discussion. I think it's important that we learn from other agencies and how they deal with this. I think you [Bill] have responded defensively as a Director.

Bill: I have been working with the Rental Assistance program for a long time. That's not the issue in this issue. It's more about the RA Committee and how they respond. I don't want to get involved ... because as Chair, they'll think that we're over-stepping our bounds. I want to make sure that the way I present it to the RA committee is palatable to them so that I don't get attacked. We need accountability for it (the FSS program) not supporting itself. I have raised it (the issue of internal referrals and support for FSS). They say that it's an internal issue that Directors raise themselves (in their own separate agencies). What does it take? Why is this such a problem?

Sherry: (Attempts to interject with explanations of her difficulties at HAP...)

Bill: You're trying to tell them how to run their business. All of those directors have a contract... We put a lot of emphasis on contractual compliance. It's not my role to dictate to the Directors about how to run their programs. I've done this many times. Before I go and get slammed again, I want to do it so they'll hear it, so that it's not offensive to any agency.

Barbara: We've always been supportive. But the consensus is that we're not being paid to do FSS. But we're obligated and so we have to do it.

Bill: I have told them that. It is not an unfunded mandate. We have a contract. I do all the budgets. If I'm obligated, I have to fund it.

Barbara: It's also important to develop the connections with the Program Reps.

Ellen: I'm sure that will be more successful. I give a lot of positive feedback to our (Program Reps). I tell them what's happening. They don't get much positive feedback. They're not onto FSS because they don't get this kind of warm and fuzzy program.

... Jane: I try to catch people (Program Reps) when they're doing something right. ... If one of them helps, then make a big issue of it. It's all in the wording.

Tina: It's also external marketing. But you need to do both external and internal marketing. If you have that relationship, it's easier to work together – enrollment, getting income adjusted... The Director is only interested in the numbers. She never asks if we're getting good referrals. I'm not sure directors are thinking in those terms. SEMAP scores aren't the whole deal.

(Continued on next page.)
to overcome the structural barriers to making the program work on their own, with some assistance from those with more authority, as long as it does not interfere with the principles of local autonomy and the value of independence.

The second tension evident in the excerpt is that among the different experiences of the individual forum members. Bill’s allusions to his interactions with Therese and Joyce contrast with Tina’s sense of the insufficient support she receives from her Director. Jane and Ellen’s partially recounted positive experiences in convincing Program Reps about the value of FSS and eliciting their cooperation clearly diverge from those of Tina and Sherry. However, the opportunity to learn from these different experiences of that tension is largely squeezed out of the conversation. Instead, discussion is redirected to the legitimacy of talking about internal dynamics in the meetings. The practitioners do not explore how they might develop personal relationships with the Reps in the absence of regular staff meetings such as the ones Jane attends. Nor does the flow of conversation allow them to ask Jane or Ellen to specify what type of positive feedback helps them persuade their colleagues to refer prospective clients or enable them to offer Tina possible responses to the criticisms of the program. Instead, the message is that practitioners must take responsibility for working through these frustrations on their own.

The third tension appears in the nature of the dialogue in the forum itself. Bill perceived discussion of the internal conflicts as casting blame. In contrast, several of the practitioners see it as an opportunity to explore solutions to a shared problem. This alternative position is clear in Wendy’s contention that it is a productive discussion and an opportunity to learn from other agencies. This tension between the positive and negative aspects of venting frustrations becomes even more apparent in subsequent meeting during this period.
The second vignette (Excerpt 3.2) from the same August 2000 meeting shows how Jane effectively bridged the first part of the discussion about the harder to serve clientele and the tensions around appropriate topics to move the group beyond the stalemate. It shows how the practitioners developed a joint statement to convey to the Directors their desire for assistance in recruiting potential FSS participants.

Excerpt 3.2: Gaining Directors' Attention to the Problem

Jane: Here's a method. Let's tell the Directors what we need. We can frame it with the reality about the changing profile and that we need to get others in our program.

Bill: Can you phrase that as a motion? Something like, "We, as FSS coordinators, have our own responsibility to recruit participants, but in light of the developing trend of the changing profile of clients we need more support."

Ellen: If we are in the numbers (having met our own agency's target), then we can't use (the proposed motion) as an entrée to the issue. We're trying to solve three problems at once. We need a general statement of information about the changing profile of our clients. Otherwise it won't work.

Leslie (Statewide FSS Coordinator at DHCD): You may want to send it to DHCD as well. We're only a little way from the next RFR (renewal for contracts for Section 8 administration from DHCD).

This reframing is in itself an example of the creative practice strategy of sensemaking. The practitioners reframed the problem so as to focus the Directors' attention on the less threatening external sources of the problem. Highlighting the themes of the previous meetings, they emphasized the changes in the clientele and the upcoming competition to secure the Section 8 funding for the agencies. They also expanded the proposed audience to include the DHCD decision-makers who preside over the RAC to emphasize that the concern applies to the aggregate of FSS programs rather than particular MNPHA agency members. The fact that the group formally crafted the statement as a "motion" also adopted the stylistic register employed in more formally conducted meetings. This formal style as means to depersonalize sensitive issues is the topic of a subsequent meeting.

This bit of dialogue shows how the forum is a venue for acknowledging the diverse challenges the practitioners face and for expressing otherwise unvoiced praise for their efforts to meet the high expectations. At the same time, this expression of appreciation was couched in relation to the practitioners' individual contributions to their own programs rather than as a
recognition of the value of the forum for the community of practice and its collective efforts to improve self-sufficiency practice.

Despite this mitigated reassurance, the practitioners ultimately decided against raising a formal motion to the Directors. The following vignette shows the practitioners’ retreat from their request for intervention. Having discovered their collective voice and a route to frame their request so that it resonates more effectively with those in authority, the practitioners ultimately opted to wait and see. Their faith in the JOBLink clientele as a source of new clients -- although far from certain -- was sufficient to convince them to reserve their appeal should it become apparent that they are unable to resolve the enrollment problem on their own. The motion was tabled in favor of conveying an informal message about the changing profile to the Directors at their next meeting.

Excerpt 3.4: The Motion and Its Retraction – Rationalizing Inaction or Calculated Reserve?

Jane: (reading her draft of the proposed motion): “Due to the changing profile of our client population, the FSS Coordinators are requesting a renewed commitment to our FSS internal referral process.”
Barbara: For those that have a problem with their agency, what will this help?
Bill: I'll make sure that discussion will take place.
Leslie: The (statewide) numbers are good.
Sherry: But how did we get there?
Jenn: Let’s add the phase, "In order to maintain numbers..."
Wendy: What do we want as an outcome? The timing is poor because of JL. They’ll say that JOBLink will take care of it.
Ellen: But JOBLink is bringing in disproportionately needy people.
Wendy: But I'm not sure it's in our interest to confront the directors.
Bill: It's harmless. It's a reminder. I do want to bring to the table a discussion of the profile, to the Executive Directors and to DHCD. My focus will be the issues that confront your. To bring it the table so that they become more aware of what you are facing.
Sharon: Is it better to do that now? Or to wait till November or December (after JOBLink is up and running)?
Bill: This is not just impacting FSS. It is impacting the lease-up rates. We have people who are not doing the housing search well. Although those in the Resource Center are working on it, it is a huge undertaking. ... In the last 6 months, we have seen more people lose their certificates than in the entire history of the program.

Is this wait and see approach a form of coping or an aspect of creativity practice? In some respects, it fits the definition of coping. Despite the ambivalence about JOBLink as a source for swelling the FSS ranks, the group preferred to allow the enrollment problem to solve itself instead of adopting a more pro-active approach to recruitment. The practitioners opted to retain
current procedures rather than take strides to approach their superiors in the RAC for assistance in altering existing inter-programmatic interactions. In this sense, forum members rationalized their understanding of the implementation environment much in the same way that Jodi Sandfort observed welfare workers’ reference their “collective understandings” of self-sufficiency goals and technology to justify their minimal achievements and preservation of current operations.

In other respects, the practitioners’ decision to conserve the opportunity for influencing the RAC for the future could be seen as a counter to traditional roles of passive silence. Rather than acquiesce to their limited power to alter the status quo, the FSS practitioners asserted their grievances collectively. Although they did not ultimately voice their request for assistance directly to those with power to fulfill it, they did reframe their grievances in way they felt would improve the FSS program.

Like Lipsky’s street-level bureaucrats, the FSS practitioners minimized their own responsibility for declining enrollment rates. Yet unlike their coping counterparts, they deflected blame away from their clients and sought to understand and influence the obstacles in their environment.11 Furthermore, their decision not to ask the Directors for assistance was not an attempt to reduce the scope of their efforts; it was decision to stick with existing routines for the time being, to hold off on doing more until the circumstances were more conducive to success. In Kate Cooney’s (2007) terms, the decision was a product of “pragmatic acceptance” as opposed to rationalized avoidance.

Whether or not their aborted attempt to augment street-level influence is an example of coping or creative effort, the tone by the end of the meeting was hopeful rather than despairing. The discussion of the enrollment challenge in the context of the “changing profile” and the other “big picture FSS” issues of welfare reform and limited educational resources produced a crisis in the practitioner discussion forum. For the first time in the nearly six years of talking together, the practitioners’ freedom to share frustrations, seek one another’s guidance, and pursue collective responses was constrained. By the end of the meeting, however, the crisis seemed to have been averted. Acknowledgement of the value of the FSS program and appreciation of the practitioners’ efforts appeased the practitioners’ concerns and the verification of future

11 The practitioners’ attribution of one source of the enrollment problem and the challenge of motivating clients to follow through with their self-sufficiency plans once they are enrolled does evoke some of the client blaming behavior frequently observed among street-level bureaucrats. However, as I discuss in greater depth in the chapter on motivating clients, the practitioners also take on the responsibility to convince FSS participants of the value of education and strategic planning and strive to re-engage them when motivation flags.
opportunities to voice their concerns to decision makers made room for hope. However, the discussion also raised questions about the limits of the practitioners’ ownership of the forum or the extent to which it serves as a community of practice that facilitates the free-flowing deliberation about the entire range of practice considered conducive to peer learning.

**Affirmed Mutual Support within the Boundaries of Street-level Influence:** This question about the boundaries of appropriate forum practice was addressed and challenged again in the next two meetings of the forum, on October 13th and December 6th of 2000. In both meetings, the RAC appointed Chair departed from the forum’s customs to exert his authority over the flow of discourse and the topic of discussion. He began the October meeting with an historical account of the FSS program and the founding of the FSS sub-committee by the RAC. He also delineated the official lines of reporting from the sub-committee to the RAC and the RAC to “the Board” of the executive directors of the agencies in the Massachusetts Nonprofit Housing Association. Bill noted that “the function and purpose of the sub-committee is to get together to share, disseminate information, and discuss issues that emerge” and “to support one another and have an aggressive program.” However, his emphasis on the subordinate position of the practitioner’s forum was an uncomfortable surprise to several of the practitioners, both veteran attendees and newcomers. The exchange between Bill and Tina, one of the veteran FSS practitioners, elicited a discussion about the format of the meetings and the practitioners’ freedom to direct discussion to the frustrations felt in the course of self-sufficiency practice.

Tina: When we started, it was more democratic. There was more venting. We now need less of the hand holding and support than the new people. Plus we are pressured by JL. Last time when we started to vent it was cut short because of these pressures. The new people don’t know that it can happen, that we can vent. You (Bill) and I have a history and can argue at the meeting, but we need to make that clear to the others.

Bill: I agree. It’s the whole purpose here. But some of the venting can be inappropriate. As chair, I use the prerogative (to direct or redirect the discussion), particularly when it (the topic) is internal to the agency.

After clarifying that in the past, practitioners submitted agenda items in advance of the meeting, a practice that was discontinued after a lull in new items, Wendy’s interjection spurred the dialogue recorded in Excerpt 3.5. This excerpt revisits the tensions in the nature of the forum discourse identified in the reading of the first excerpt from the August 2000 meeting. In this October 2000 meeting, the debate over the most effective format for discussion was more overt and the questions about the practitioners’ power and autonomy were discussed directly in
Excerpt 3.5: The Debate About the Value of Venting

Wendy: The question to grasp is do people think this is an effective group and does the format work? For myself, I feel that Bill monopolizes, regardless of how long we have been here. The structure is disheartening. Three years ago there was more interaction. Partly because of Bill’s control, we don’t get to hear from all of these wonderful people. Everything I learned about FSS came from this meeting. I’m not sure the new people are getting that now.

Sherry: I agree with Wendy. I also see a change.

Bill: I’m very open to input and new agenda setting. But I will curtail inappropriate discussion.

Wendy: Could you give us some examples (of inappropriate discussion)?

Bill: Internal issues with Rental Assistance directors.

Tina: Can we penalize leasing administrators who do not tell their people to make referrals?

Sherry: We were talking about accountability.

Tina: ... We were trying to frame it in a way that could be raised the RA committee.

Wendy: It’s not personal.... (in reference to both Bill and the RA directors)

Tina: If we’re all together and want to discuss how we deal with referrals in the different agencies...

We wanted to vent and brainstorm and Bill said that this wasn’t the appropriate place to do it.

Sherry: But it affects us and the program because we can’t get our numbers up.

Bill: We’re not about telling people and directors how to run their programs.

Wendy: But if we really are a subcommittee maybe it’s our responsibility. Especially if it is beyond an individual issue. You could bring it up as a challenge for them to address. It is an appropriate place to address it.

Jenn: What I’m hearing is that we all want support and want to hear each other’s ideas. We want the time to discuss that. Not necessarily to bring it to the Board.

Ellen: We need training. This would be a good topic: how to communicate, how to motivate internal communications.

Bill: I agree that we want to talk about these things, but I don’t like the way it has evolved. It’s my responsibility to move the meeting along. Especially when we do them (FSS and JL) back to back. In the past, I got feedback from the directors that I needed to take more control. There were also complaints from the RA meeting.

Wendy: Maybe others could facilitate even with Bill being the Chair.

Ellen: It’s our responsibility to bring up our issues.

Amelia: I was invited to this committee to learn more about FSS because it is crucial to JL. But I haven’t learned enough. I was glad to learn about the problem of internal referrals and thought it should be discussed. Instead, it became very political. But because of the direction of the discussion, I only learned that others shared the problem, not ways to resolve it. We need to talk about what the Reps and case managers are doing to improve the program.

Tina: We have a lot of new people now. ... We need to “re-share” marketing techniques, internal referrals, tracking methods...

addition to the implications for improving enrollment practice. The discussion also clearly articulated the importance of sharing ideas, newcomer learning, and mutual support and it expresses the members’ desire for more informal exchanges as well as training opportunities. Coupled with these requests for more autonomy, is the acknowledgment of the accompanying responsibilities. They noted the need for someone to take responsibility for facilitating
productive discussion and raising agenda items as well as the need to remain accountable for meeting and maintaining enrollment numbers.

The practitioners went on to suggest that they resume the practice of individual updates yet restrict each report to not more than two minutes. They also discussed the advantages of holding the FSS and JOBLink meetings on separate days to allow more time for informal discussion after the meetings. However, the meeting ended before the questions about the appropriate division of responsibilities were resolved. Nor did they resolve how to ensure that discussions would remain productive. As Wendy suggested, “This group hasn’t established rules… It may be good to talk about confidentiality and trust. How can we talk without things going back to the Board?” Ellen’s response set the tone for further exploration: “When we have a spirited discussion, a lot of negative things come out. But we need to turn it into a positive thing. For example, when we address marketing challenges, we could look at it as opportunities rather than as fixing ugly things.”

### Excerpt 3.6: Confirmation of the Forum as a Venue for Mutual Support

Joanne: I’m concerned about formality. I need to feel comfortable enough to ask nuts and bolts questions. I’m new and appreciate that part.

Bill: I would not want to discourage anyone from speaking up at the meetings. I’m not supporting that we adopt this kind of formality. For this kind of group, you are a different kind of arm for your agencies. I strongly recommend that you make this a network for each other.

Tina: Can we decide what the balance is? At the Berkshire meeting (in October), we talked about the group as being supportive to one another. At my agency, I feel that I can shut the door and vent with (my leased housing director). But this is a group of my PEERS, so there is a sense of understanding. If it takes a few minutes, that’s fine. I would like latitude. I understand what you’re saying about the personal and the internal, but this is a good opportunity to vent, to have that space. I don’t want to give that up. It can be constructive, but I want that room for support.

Bill: It’s a fine line. Because of the importance of the work that you do. As long as you don’t make it personal. But you all are the bastard children of the housing association, for lack of a better term. The mission of your agency is primarily affordable housing. JL and FSS is a very different sort of business and a lot of the directors don’t have that understanding, not of the nuts and bolts. So here, this Sub-Committee is an important vehicle of support for that. But please don’t take away from this meeting that I’m discouraging that.

Barbara: The things Tina is talking about are appropriate.

Bill: Yes. But again, it should not be personalized.

JB: The actual mission statement reflects that role of support.* It says, (reading from the September 16, 1997 memo from Bill to the FSS Subcommittee that was distributed at the meeting) "... meet monthly for mutual support."

Jane: and the Rental Assistance Committee approved this mission.

Jenn: It also says, "focus and analysis". I think that’s where we need to take the next step.

[*The full "mission statement" from that memo: "The FSS Subcommittee consists of FSS Coordinators who meet monthly for mutual support, information sharing, brainstorming, problem identification, focus and analysis with suggested solutions for each agency." ]
The discourse about appropriate discussion formats continued in the following meeting in December. The printed agenda item read, “Discussion of Subcommittee History, Chairperson’s Role, Meeting Protocol, Decorum, Procedures, Mission, Discuss Issues, Feedback, Agenda.” However, rather than follow Ellen’s suggestion to find ways to turn venting into learning opportunities, the Chair used the session as a training in proper conduct in meetings. For the first hour and a half of the meeting, Bill read from his handwritten notes copied verbatim from Robert’s Rules of Order. While an unfamiliar tone of formal acquiescence pervaded the group during his readings, the performance was – in a fashion more typical to the group – peppered with interjections, jests, questions and clarifications, in short, the very heated debate that Robert’s Rules is designed to restrain. Throughout Bill’s presentation, others cautiously challenged the value of formality, citing the benefits of informal exchanges for program development, new staff guidance, information sharing, and emotional support. Yet all objections acknowledged Bill’s authority and the legitimacy of the historical document and by-laws even as they questioned their complete applicability to this context. Ultimately, Bill himself adopted a more informal sense of formality: “We have been committed in our mission and are doing our work. Overall, we pretty much keep our goals. Part of that good work has been the informality. But we need to reign it in....”

The meeting intensified all three of the tensions identified earlier. First, it reinforced the sub-ordinate position of the community of practitioners in relation to the RAC. The participants questioned Bill’s depiction of the top-down lines of authority from Board to Sub-Committee. They referred to the value of the forum’s discretion to shape implementation guidelines and formulate policy decisions that a two-month wait for Board approval would undermine. At the same time, discussion underscored the practitioners’ need for support from agency directors and the MNPHA Board to negotiate more cooperative inter-programmatic arrangements that spurred the discussion about meeting decorum. As Bill noted, “You really need that link (with the Board). It is not about questioning the trust. It’s an issue of direction and connection. They recognize that you have done fabulous work.” Secondly, the emphasis on depersonalized interactions underscored the potential for conflict among forum members in addition to that between the practitioners and their various superiors. Third, in the eyes of the practitioners, the formality of the procedures promised to exacerbate the tension between covering substantive topics and creating an environment conducive to learning and mutual support.
Excerpt 3.6 from the discussion towards the close of the December 6th, 2000 meeting illustrates how engaging in explicit discussion about these tensions enabled the practitioners to effectively articulate their desire to make informal conversation towards mutual support a priority for the forum within the realm of their limited authority.

These closing comments reinforced the value of the forum as a comfortable environment for the practitioners to voice their concerns about making the program work better, even when doing so raises sensitive issues. Bill confirmed the importance of their work and acknowledged the forum as “an important vehicle of support” and a “network for each other.” Reference to the RAC approved mission statement allowed the practitioners to legitimate their desire to make mutual support a priority.


Each of the FSS forum meetings following the stormy December 6, 2000 discussion began with the restored ritual of updates from each of the practitioners. The custom of convening for lunch following the meetings also resumed as a result of the decision to convene the JOBLink forum meetings in alternate months. An additional change was that responsibility for facilitating the forum shifted from Bill to Barbara who shared Bill’s enthusiasm for FSS as well as the understanding of the tensions between self-sufficiency and other service programs and the agencies’ core housing programs as her comments in the previous excerpts reflect. In the calm after the storm smoothed further by the atmosphere of the now all female composition of the group, sharing the frustrations and joys of FSS practice and helping one another with the dilemmas of practice occupied the majority of the meeting time.

I begin this segment of the historical narrative by describing how forum members refreshed the collective memory about creative recruitment strategies discussed in past meetings and how the restoration of the ritual of celebrating small triumphs with peers led to the diffusion of creative practices among forum members. I then recount the story of how the JOBLink forum’s encounter with the problem of intra-agency communication facilitated the replication of a creative practice throughout the community of practice. I close by describing the practitioners’ deliberation about appropriate client selection given the new context of having satisfied statewide enrollment targets. This account evidences an additional facet of the dynamic of creative street-level practice. What is considered appropriate at one time changes not only with
increasing understanding about what works; the judgment of whether a practice adds value to the program is also a function of changing circumstances.

**Reactivating Collective Memory and the Sense of the Collective:** Sharing ideas for marketing FSS to prospective participants was a primary agenda item in the following three meetings in January, March, and May of 2001. The ideas shared mirrored those presented when the forum first convened. The practitioners discussed all the ways they and their predecessors have utilized the opportunities to contact clients within the usual routines of Section 8 administration. Their suggestions about attending briefings, including flyers about FSS in mailings to tenants, and making FSS brochures available in waiting rooms and lobbies were already part of the community’s repertoire of recruitment practices. As in previous discussions, consensus held that internal referrals by the regular Section 8 staff were the best way to recruit prospective FSS participants and to ensure that those interested would enroll before taking on new jobs so as to maximize the benefit of the escrow accounts. The practitioners also reiterated the importance of repeating these strategies even if the response rate is low. As one practitioner voiced, “The idea of FSS needs to be in the back of their minds.”

The practitioners brought their recent flyers and other printed materials to help one another refresh marketing resources. This recollection of practices already in the collective repertoire meant that the newcomers to the forum -- evidence of the tide of turnover since the initial discussions -- benefited most directly from the reiteration of past marketing strategies. Yet longstanding forum members benefited as well, as the practitioners’ minutes reflect: “This is what we were all looking for in these meetings -- the opportunity to share information and learn what works from each other.” This appreciation suggests that stories about what works need to be continually retold in order to remain an active part of the community’s repertoire of practices. Repeating creative recruitment ideas helped the practitioners put them into action just as repeating the recruitment message encouraged prospective clients to eventually sign up for FSS.

The restoration of the initial updates also contributed to this revived sense of community. In fact, sometimes so much time was devoted to sharing members’ recent experiences that scheduled agenda items were not discussed. Venting frustrations, including those related to enrollment, also echoed past discussions, particularly regarding the limited time to devote to recruitment. This strain was especially pronounced for the newcomers learning the role and establishing relationships with the clientele and for practitioners charged with JOBLink
responsibilities as well FSS. The practitioners also noted the increasing pressures to recruit in light of the growing number of graduations and terminations. (Recall Figure 3.3.) In addition, forum members introduced a new frustration that recruiting FSS participants from the pool of JOBLink participants was proving more difficult than anticipated; both the new JOBLink participants and the JOBLink staff were overwhelmed with the task of settling into new roles and had little attention to devote to a program with a five-year commitment.

These frustrations notwithstanding, the updates during this period also occasioned celebrations of rising enrollment rates. As Figure 3.2 illustrates, statewide enrollment rates hit the target by the end of the 2001 fiscal year and rising new enrollment subsequently increased the state numbers still further. Reports on progress towards meeting enrollment targets dominated the updates throughout 2001 and 2002, yet as noted above, the increase in enrollment was more pronounced in some agencies than others (Figure 3.2). Those who were making substantial headway in meeting their enrollment targets were greeted with applause during the ritual round of updates in the meetings. Interestingly, those who recounted progress received praise and whereas those who shared frustrations received sympathy and constructive suggestions, those who were silent about low enrollment rates were neither admonished nor encouraged; the response to silence was silence.

**Adopting Creative Practices with a Little Help from JOBLink Colleagues:** Jenn conveyed satisfaction about finding a way to talk about FSS with the Program Reps so as to encourage referrals to the program as well as address other emergent practice problems. She shared her agency’s decision to put into place a new organizing structure the FSS and JOBLink staff devised to improve inter-program communication. Two “Specialized Reps” were appointed to handle voucher administration exclusively for the FSS and JOBLink clientele. The Specialized Reps communicated changes in income and updated contact information directly to the self-sufficiency staff. This information allowed FSS practitioners to target JOBLink families likely to benefit from FSS case management and relatively high probability of amassing substantial escrow savings upon obtaining steady employment. It also helped with other FSS tasks such as managing escrow accounts that were becoming increasingly burdensome with mounting caseloads.

As a departure from established job descriptions and routines of Section 8-FSS interaction, the introduction Specialized Reps fits the definition of creative street-level practice. Jenn’s peers
congratulated her for addressing the problem creatively. They agreed that the new position would help develop the good working relationships they considered more vital to FSS practice than the administrative procedures for transferring information across agency departments. Recognition of the value of this new arrangement for improving FSS workflow led other some forum members to propose appointing Specialized Reps in their own agencies.

However, despite the forum’s endorsement, many of the practitioners were unable to convince their directors to establish the new position. Only when the Chair of the JOBLink forum promoted the Specialized Rep solution among other Rental Assistance directors did others follow suit. To date, all but two of the agencies have adopted this system. The successful appeal to the RAC on behalf of JOBLink practitioners thus accentuates the FSS practitioners’ relatively limited influence and, at the same time, demonstrates the positive impact of JOBLink on addressing longstanding FSS practice problems, especially with the accompanying mediation between the forums and higher-level decision makers.

**Defining Appropriateness with Help from Forum Members:** The combined effects of the new pool of JOBLink participants, improved internal agency relations, and ongoing recruitment efforts brought state-wide FSS participation securely beyond the statewide quota during this time. (See Figure 3.1.) Also boosting enrollment were rumors about the new Section 8 Home Ownership program approved by Congress as part of the 1998 housing reform act boosted interest in FSS. Although DHCD had yet to design a Section 8 Home Ownership program, FSS practitioners began receiving calls from voucher holders who surmised that the nonprofits would follow other HAs and make FSS participation a precondition for using their vouchers to purchase homes.

The decreasing pressures to “get the numbers up” led forum members to intimate a revised theory-in-use about who is an appropriate candidate for FSS participation. Until now, the practitioners had operated under the virtually unquestioned assumption that “any client was a

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12 One of the two exceptions was SMOC, a smaller agency where the unique division of labor precluded the change; the same staff is responsible for all income and rent processing as well as housing quality inspections for specific geographical areas. The other exception was CTI that soon afterwards split responsibility for JOBLink into two staff positions with responsibility for both the administration of the housing voucher and the self-sufficiency component of the program. More recently, these practitioners have also assumed responsibility for the entire FSS program as well after the agency decided to lay off the FSS practitioner. While this move increases the integration between administrative and self-sufficiency roles, the impact on the FSS program is unclear; neither of the practitioners had previous experience in social service provision.

13 Ultimately, DHCD elected not to offer the Section 8 Home Ownership program.
good client.” Discussion about clients who proved to be disinterested in pursuing self-sufficiency goals had occupied the practitioners’ attention early on in implementation yet the pressure to increase enrollment largely outweighed the practitioners’ concerns about selectivity. Starting in February of 2002, forum members entertained the idea of about targeting outreach to those who are more inclined to participate actively in the program.

HUD authorizes a front-door approach of selecting potential participants based on evidence of their motivation to become self-sufficient as an alternative to the back-door approach of eliminating less motivated participants after they have joined FSS. This authorized version of “creaming” the most likely to succeed – one of Lipsky’s coping mechanisms – raised more questions about how to “do the right thing” than did the discussions of how to recruit prospective participants to take advantage of the program. As HUD’s regulations do not specify how to select motivated applicants, the practitioners needed to devise their own technologies for translating their theory-in-use of appropriate selectivity into practice.

Sharing proposals in the forum allowed the practitioners to get feedback from peers to legitimate their ideas for screening for motivation. For example, forum members affirmed Ruth’s new practice of waiting for prospective clients to contact her after the first stage of the enrollment process rather than actively pursuing them when they failed to show up for their scheduled appointment as she had done in the past. Ruth’s more experienced peers recounted their use of similar self-selection measures to establish Ruth’s departure from routine as a valued norm within the community of practice.

Sherry and Wendy presented their plans to require prospective participants to bring a printed copy of their credit reports to their pre-enrollment assessments. The idea for this addition to the established enrollment process was both to test for ability to follow through with a commitment and to introduce credit repair into the individual training and service plans. Forum members conveyed their approval and asked Sherry and Wendy to report back on how many clients actually followed through. While the topic quickly shifted to sharing information about the lending industry and new resources for credit repair, the discussion was sufficient to establish the proposal as creative street-level practice, at least until the test of what works in practice would prove otherwise.

Each of these departures from the previous mode of accepting any client who successfully completed all steps of the enrollment process was intended as an improvement to ongoing
practice as a means to systematize determinations of good fit rather than treat each application as an isolated decision event.

**Epilogue:**

After the January 2003 meeting, enrollment ceased to appear on the meeting agendas and did not capture the forum’s attention again until February 2005. At this meeting – the first after a long hiatus – the topic emerged in response to ongoing uncertainty about the survival of the FSS program in light of HUD’s proposed budget cuts and subsequent staff reductions. Some practitioners questioned whether it made sense to enroll new participants when HUD’s own commitment to the program was in doubt. Doubts about the feasibility of boosting enrollment also related to the decline in prospective applicants following the decision to phase out JOBLINK program and the absence of appropriations for new housing vouchers. These developments also meant that the agencies did not receive budget increases they had been counting on. In the atmosphere of fiscal austerity that ensued, the RAC decided to merge the FSS and JOBLINK forums and to allow them to meet only quarterly instead of bi-monthly. The infrequency of the meetings and the shift from the programmatic to cross-programmatic focus dissipated the momentum and eroded the cohesion in the group.

### 3.2 Discussion: Creativity and Coping in Individual and Collective Responses to the Enrollment Challenge

This investigation of the nonprofit practitioners’ efforts to reach FSS enrollment targets over the decade of practice captured by the minutes and observations of the discussion forum provides several initial insights about the feasibility of creative street-level practice and the role of the forums. This discussion of findings points to the fluctuations of attention to the practice problem and assesses the extent to which the practitioners’ responses fit the definition of creative practice as opposed to coping. It examines the use of available resources and the practitioners’ capacity to use them to advance their theories of the problem and potential solutions. The section closes with a preliminary characterization of how the discussion forum contributes to the practitioners’ efforts to engage in creative street-level practice.

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14 I discuss the efforts of the nonprofit and public FSS forums’ responses to HUD’s proposals – known as the Flexible Voucher Plan – in the context of explicating their collective advocacy efforts in a subsequent chapter. Uncertainty about the impact of the new FSS program on the ongoing Operation Bootstrap program resulted in similar declines in enrollment (Frees et al 1994).
The Arch of Attention to the Challenges Enrolling Clients

The story of the practitioners' efforts to address the enrollment challenge evidence that street-level problem solving does not fix practice problems once and for all. Rather, the practitioners’ attention to the challenge of meeting the minimum program size fluctuated in the course of practice. The fluctuation can be explained in relation to each of the three principles of governance: their responsiveness to programmatic and environmental developments, their capacity to take responsibility for improving practice, and their opportunities to expand their capacity for responsible responsiveness through deliberating together about problems and solutions.

Attention to enrollment in forum discussions followed the arch of program developments. The pressures of starting up made enrollment the focus of discussion until the group came close to meeting the state target and then regained attention when terminations and graduations renewed the commitment to attracting new participants. Once participation levels were restored, discussion shifted to appropriate practices for selective enrollment until uncertainty about the continuation of the program put these efforts on hold. Competition for attention from other practice problems also influenced the time available for discussing the challenge in the forum. Factors in the policy environment also influenced the practitioners’ attention to the enrollment challenge. They responded to the early effects of welfare reform, the introduction of the JOBLink and Section 8 Homeownership programs, the cuts in Section 8 voucher authorizations, and the threat of fundamental changes to the FSS program.

The practitioners devoted only limited attention to suggestions for creative responses to the enrollment challenge when they did not sense that they were feasible to carry out, as in the idea of enlisting the help of other service providers and changing federal rules about escrow accounts and mandated participation. And they abandoned creative efforts once it became apparent that they were not paying off. In contrast, the practitioners’ capacity to help one another devise assessment tools was so successful that, although the tool was not discussed in later years, all of the practitioners continued to use it, even newcomers to the community of practice who had not been present when it was first introduced.

The quality of discussion in the forum also influenced the attention to enrollment and consequently their capacity for problem solving. Enrollment was a more frequent topic when the custom of starting the meetings with a round of updates was in operation. When that custom was
discontinued, practitioners who were struggling to reach their minimum program sizes did not voice their concerns and thus did not have an opportunity to hear from their peers. The Chair's concerns about addressing agency-specific challenges in the forum also steered attention away from problem solving on the issue until the debate about appropriate discourse and changes in forum facilitation restored the practitioners' autonomy over the content of discussion.

Coping and Creativity in the Practitioners' Responses to the Enrollment Challenge:

One might interpret the sustained period of falling short of the expected program size as evidence of shirking, sabotage, or, as in the case of the welfare workers described in the previous chapter, resistance to the essential idea of self-sufficiency, broadly defined. What distinguishes the FSS practitioners' responses as witnessed through the forum discussions from these goal thwarting behaviors is the evidence of their efforts to meet the expectations. Although efforts to expand program participation were neither constant nor uniform across forum members, there was little evidence of the conflicting motives that predominate the classical accounts of street-level bureaucracy. Indeed, all of the practitioners talked about their attempts to try new approaches to recruitment.

What is less immediately apparent is whether the FSS practitioners' responses were merely rationalizations of their failure to meet the expectations akin to the "collective understandings" and "pragmatic acceptance" Sandfort and Cooney discerned among frontline welfare-to-work staff or whether they can be viewed as contributions to the ongoing practice of meeting enrollment objectives. Each of Lipsky's coping mechanisms provides a foil for assessing whether the FSS practitioners' responses detracted from program operation or whether their efforts aimed to augment the value for the prospective clientele.

Assuming Burdens vs. Blaming Clients: The minutes and transcripts of over a decade of FSS practice left very few overt examples of blaming Section 8 tenants for failing to sign up for the program. Typically, the practitioners attributed the disinclination to join FSS to the limitations of the program design. They blamed the clients' lack of interest in pursuing the goal of self-sufficiency when they are overwhelmed with their family's other pressing priorities. They blamed the limits of the technology of the escrow incentive, especially in light of the inadequate opportunities for clients to develop their earning capacity. And they blamed the disconnected organizational infrastructure and the lack of assistance from their colleagues for constraining outreach efforts. Most prominently, however, the practitioners took it upon
themselves to explain the advantages of FSS to prospective clients. Rather than deflect blame, they mostly assumed the burden themselves.

Adapting New, Value-Adding Routines vs. Routinizing Complex Tasks: Because the official directives for FSS practice did not stipulate any explicit enrollment procedures, all of the practices the practitioners developed were extensions rather than contractions of complex tasks. Thus although several of the practices imported from the repertoire of regular Section 8 procedures comprised only subtle departures from already established routines, they fit the definition of creative street-level practice in that they added value to FSS enrollment practice. The practitioners’ acknowledgement that successful recruitment often requires multiple exchanges with potential clients made it difficult for them to attribute increases in program size directly to each novel enrollment practice. In fact, the incentives of the program design may well have been the primary factor accounting for many clients’ decision to join the program. Yet according to the practitioners’ accounts conveyed in the forum discussions, the effects of their recruitment strategies were often obvious; expressions of interest followed by a signed contract of participation provided concrete evidence even though few actually measured the results of each strategy.

The idea that Specialized Reps would take on all of the housing related procedures for tenants involved in the self-sufficiency programs could be considered a form of routinization of complex tasks. The formalization of the procedures at the complicated interface between FSS and JOBLink was the very point of this new position. Instead of skipping over the more complex demands of work with self-sufficiency program participants, the workers in these new roles pursued them more effectively.

Furthermore, each of these adaptations of Section 8 routines for FSS purposes aimed to improve to ongoing practice—making programs better—rather than the resolution to situational dilemma—doing the right thing for individual clients. As there are no explicit rules for enrollment procedures, the practitioners had no choice but to participate in the governance task of improving the program.

Rationing Services?: The prevalence of the coping mechanism commonly known as “creaming” – the selection of clients who are considered more deserving or easier to serve than others – is more difficult to discern from the evidence in the forum, at least with respect to the responses to the challenge of enrollment. In fact, only in the last year of the study period did the
practitioners consider dissuading potential participants from enrolling. On the contrary, serving any client who expressed enough interest to follow through with the steps towards signing a contract of participation was welcomed. When the practitioners began to be more selective in enrolling FSS clients, they designed mechanisms for targeting those who exhibited motivation to pursue self-sufficiency goals. Although clearly a form of “creaming,” this rationing of scarce resources is explicitly endorsed in the official regulations. (Their attempts to discern prospective clients’ willingness to make an effort to participate in the program echo those of their JOBLink counterparts I analyze in a later chapter.) Certainly, the fact that the practitioners articulated selection practices to be applied universally does not mean that inappropriate selectivity never occurred. However, it does suggest that forum members were attempting to create systems for fair assessments.

Pursuing and Defending Clients vs. Exerting Power Over Clients: FSS practitioners did not have the option of coercing clients as a means to cope with their frustrations about their own limited power in the hierarchy. Logically, it is not possible to exert power over clients who have yet to join the program. In some respects the practitioners have even less power than their prospective clients who have the ability to choose whether or not to sign up for FSS; the practitioners, in contrast, are expected to meet the enrollment targets. Nor did the FSS practitioners project resentment of clients’ receipt of benefits as has been observed among frontline service workers. FSS practitioners recounted that this reaction was common among their Section 8 colleagues who lamented the fact that their hard work did not make them eligible for an escrow account. Forum members not only vehemently criticized this perspective; their defense of FSS clients’ entitlement to the escrowed savings drew on personalized accounts of clients’ perseverance in their pursuit of self-sufficiency goals that aimed to appeal to their colleagues’ sense of empathy for these clients.

Yet the reality of the practitioners’ position at the bottom of the organizational and policy hierarchy also influenced the extent to which their efforts to meet enrollment expectations paid off. Many of their efforts did not yield the desired results and they abandoned others when frustration subsumed their will to continue. Analysis of the practitioners’ theories-in-use that guided their efforts to improve enrollment practices and the resources available for employing the strategies of creative practice further illuminates what is feasible to expect them to contribute.
Theories-In-Use, Available Resources, and the Capacity to Use Them Strategically:

The official FSS designs were based on the assumption that the incentives of the escrow accounts and the prospects of getting help in navigating the service system would be sufficient to attract prospective participants. (Indeed, this assumption has proved accurate for most HUD programs that typically have long wait-lists for enrollment instead of the unfilled slots that still remain prevalent among FSS programs nationally.) Therefore, each of the outreach practices the practitioners developed constituted revisions to the program design’s theory of automatic recruitment. Forum discussions about the struggle to meet enrollment targets surfaced several theories-in-use to explain why prospective tenants were not flocking to the program and what to do to attract them. I have summarized these in Table 3.2 along with the resources available for putting their ideas into action and the strategies they employed to so.

Several of the practices developed based on these ideas about attracting prospective clients proved effective, according to the practitioners’ assessment. These successful, or partially successful, efforts employed each of the strategies for taking advantage of existing resources (“latent potential”) identified in Chapter 1. The practitioners made use of Section 8 administrative procedures and agency space to craft new routines; they framed explanations for their proposals to persuade those with decision making power and they engaged partners in other departments to cooperate with their recruitment efforts.

However, many of the practitioners’ efforts were not implemented or were implemented only by some of the practitioners. Whether abandoned after considerable effort, as in the case of the promotional video and the appeal to the welfare department to exempt FSS participants from the work requirement, or never fully pursued, as in the suggestion for HUD to alter the escrowing formula and mandate participation, the lack of resources explains much of the failure. The FSS designs provided no procedures, structures, or routines for the practitioners to modify. They had no clients to join them in the effort – with the exception of those who would have appeared in the video. Potential partners among other service providers and along the hierarchy in many of the housing agencies did not see a nexus between FSS promotion and their own program goals. As frontline practitioners serving only a fraction of the nation’s prospective FSS clientele, the practitioners had little means to influence HUD’s decision making about a program that was low-priority in any respect. Nor did the practitioners stand much of a chance to
influence Massachusetts’ explicitly work-first welfare policy, especially given the historic isolation between state departments.

This scarcity of material to apply to creative practice makes the practitioners successful efforts all the more impressive. Their capacity to take advantage of them is due, in part, to their participation in the discussion forums.

Creative Practice in the Practitioner Discussion Forum:

In addition to providing insights about individual practitioners’ efforts to create new enrollment practices, the meeting minutes and observations of forum discussions illuminated what was gained from engaging regularly with members of the community of practice. The discussion forum furthered creative street-level practice in three ways. The forums are primarily learning networks. Yet they also sometimes function as work teams and support groups.

A Learning Network: In the decade of discussions in the forums, the otherwise isolated FSS practitioners found numerous opportunities to learn about self-sufficiency practice from their peers in the other nonprofit housing agencies. Lessons about how to overcome the challenges of recruiting and enrolling new participants evidence the range of modes of learning in the forum. Sharing practices for boosting enrollment rates was the most common form of learning. Practitioners adopted one another’s techniques and their conversations about their cumulative experimentation established the community’s norms of practice. Other learning was more formal. The self-led graphics workshop was an example of how forum members helped develop one another’s expertise. Bill’s training on Robert’s Rules of Order aimed to introduce professional skills for appropriate meeting participation and facilitation.

The enrollment narrative also evidences that the forum was a venue for newcomers to learn the community’s norms and access the collective repertoire of creative practices. The continuous and uniform use of the assessment tools devised in the forum’s first year exemplify this function. In other cases, purposeful dedication of meeting time was necessary to refresh the collective memory and pass along knowledge to newcomers, as in the sharing of promotional materials in the meetings following the explosive discussion about internal agency communication challenges.

At the same time, learning about their peers’ creative approaches to enrollment did not necessarily mean that the new practices were transferable to their own work contexts. Differences in relationships with colleagues in other service agencies and Section 8 departments
sometimes precluded replication. This finding points to the important distinction between learning and action; learning is key to action yet does not necessarily follow as a result (Clegg and Hardy).

Several of the discussions analyzed in this chapter also evidenced the practitioners’ capacity to deepen their understanding of practice problems through reflection on shared practice. The brainstorming in the “Big Picture FSS” discussion, for example, generated explanations for the changing profile of the FSS clientele. This understanding was intended to trigger ideas for novel ways of addressing the problem. The subsequent controversy over the appropriateness of discussing internal agency challenges ultimately spurred defensive rather than exploratory discourse. The intention nevertheless points to the potential for productive deliberation.

**A Work Team:** Clearly, the practitioner forum is not an organizational work team (Hackman 1987; Wageman 1995, 2001). The forum was not formed with the purpose of sharing responsibility for managing task performance among interdependent organizational actors. Forum members operate their FSS programs independently and, although their agencies share an affiliation with the MNPHA association, the practitioners are decidedly not members of the same organization. Nevertheless, the responses to the enrollment challenge evidenced collective efforts that resemble those of work teams. Once the forum members had cohered as a group, they began to act together to address the challenge of enrolling clients in addition to learning how to improve their separate practices.

These concerted efforts showed the potential for farther reaching improvements to practice than the individual practitioners could pursue on their own. By working together, forum members could pool their resources and take advantage of economies of scale, as in the idea for the promotional video. Their collective voices also gave them greater access to decision makers and, potentially, more influence, as the advocacy for policy changes evidence.

Despite this potential, of the five collective efforts depicted in Table 3.2, only two were actually implemented as creative practices: the appeal to DHCD to reapportion minimum program sizes across the agencies and appeal to the agency rental assistance to adopt the Specialized Rep model. In fact, the latter was due to the Chair of the JOBLink forum’s intervention. The practitioners’ limited leverage with state and national policymakers noted above is one explanation more of these collective efforts were not successful. The lack of available resources for applying the strategies of altering and recombining routines and
partnering with other system actors explains why they did not pursue more collective approaches to enrollment challenges.

The practitioners’ limited capacity to follow through with their plans or formulate more concrete ideas for action may also be a function of how the forum was supported. On the one hand, members’ reluctance to submit agenda items or steer the discussion to more productive topics may be a reflection of their limited sense of ownership over the forum. On the other hand, their efforts might have been more fruitful had they received more help in facilitating discussions and accessing resources and more encouragement to follow through with their plans.

**A Support Group:** The role of the forum as a venue for telling war stories of the struggles to meet the enrollment expectations is central to the historical account of this chapter. Venting frustrations and celebrating triumphs were the first utterances in the forum’s inaugural meeting in 1994. Debates about the value of venting triggered the heated debates over appropriate discourse in the forum in the last half of 2000, the third phase of implementation. This debate ultimately reinforced the value of talking about frustrations. Members expressed their appreciation of the opportunity to confirm that their struggles were inherent to the program design or work context rather than their personal failures. Celebration of otherwise unacknowledged achievements — such as gradual progress towards the enrollment targets — also proved instrumental to motivating the practitioners to continue their efforts to make the program work.

These types of interactions closely resemble those of support groups or networks of care and support for those who share a common set of beliefs (Katz 1981; Wuthnow 1994; Wituk et al 2002). Such groups fill members’ needs for a point of connection and identification with others and serve as a source of ego reinforcement. In fact, it is in this sense that the discussion forum is a *community* of practice rather than merely a committee or group. It is important to note, however, that the support in the FSS forum was purposeful in addition to personal. Although the practitioners commiserated with one another about their inability to meet the enrollment expectations, their cohesion as a group did not appear to have the same solidary effects that reinforce the shirking and sabotage observed in the classical accounts of street-level bureaucracy. If anything, they encouraged one another to do more rather than do less.

Moreover, the historical account of the forum’s response to the enrollment challenge suggests that the supportive venting and celebrating is conducive to learning and collective
action. It appears that when forum members feel they have a safe place to expose what is not working in their practice, they activate the group’s collective memory of previously shared practices and trigger the quest for new creative practices. The supportive functions may also be necessary for the group to act together by acknowledging the interdependencies that result from their common feelings about their work, about one another, and about the group itself. The expressions of mutual support seem to join the personal and the professional in a way that ignites intrinsic motivation to make self-sufficiency practice better.

At the same time, the history of addressing the enrollment challenge also suggests that there may be a tension or even a trade-off between supporting one another’s individual practice and collective action. Indeed, in the period following the 2000 debates that reestablished the rituals of the updates, post-meeting lunches, and more informal meeting facilitation, there was no further collective action with respect to the enrollment problem. The nonprofit forum did pursue collective responses to other practice problems detailed in later chapters, yet none of these proved as extensive as those in this forum’s early history. Comparisons with the activities of the forum of FSS practitioners from the public housing authorities in subsequent chapters afford further inquiry into the relationship among each of the functions of supporting one another, learning from each other, and acting together.

3.3 Conclusion: The Limits and Promise of Creative Street-Level Practice

My interpretation of the history of the FSS nonprofit forum’s responses to the enrollment challenge suggests that those who lack recognized authority or status can nevertheless participate in the work of governance, at least to some extent, some of the time. Although it is not entirely clear that the increases in enrollment were a direct result of the novel practices, they added value in the practitioners’ subjective assessment – the key criterion for the designation as creative street-level practices. The practitioners’ efforts to enroll clients in the face of the limitations of the official FSS designs employed each of the strategies of creative street-level practice. They adapted existing routines to create new ones and they attempted to persuade partners across organizational and departmental boundaries to cooperate with outreach efforts. Participation in the discussion forum enhanced the FSS practitioners’ capacity to engage in creative approaches to enrollment – both in their distinct practices and collectively – and to legitimate their novel approaches to self-sufficiency work as value-adding contributions.
However, effects of these new practices were not dramatic even in the eyes of the practitioners; it took many years for the statewide numbers to reach the target and some agencies have yet to achieve their minimum program size. In later years, several of the practitioners certainly seemed to have accepted the fact that they were not meeting the expectations for enrollment. This acquiescence is a form of coping that recognizes the limits of the practitioners’ capacity to meet program expectations given the constraints of the program designs and the implementation environment. Indeed the story of the practitioners’ efforts to overcome the challenges to enrollment points to the reality that creative street-level practice is not always feasible, even with the support of the practitioner discussion forum. The lack of available resources and external supports to employ the strategies of creative practice may indicate that some degree of coping is inevitable.

Under these circumstances, the inclination to manage expectations -- or, in Cooney’s (2007) terms, to adopt the attitude of “pragmatic acceptance” -- may actually be the most appropriate response to practice problems. As Lipsky stresses, coping is desirable when it allows practitioners to survive impossible programmatic demands with their values of good service
Table 3.2 Theories-In-Use, Available Resources, and the Capacity to Use Them Strategically to Recruit FSS Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory of the Problem</th>
<th>Theory of the Solution</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Individual or Collective Pursuit</th>
<th>Creative Pursuit Implemented?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lack of awareness of the program</td>
<td>inform potential clients</td>
<td>Section 8 administration procedures, space for promotional materials</td>
<td>bricolage</td>
<td>individual</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of understanding about the program</td>
<td>face-to-face communication</td>
<td>paucity of venues for interaction</td>
<td>sensemaking</td>
<td>individual</td>
<td>varied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>promotional video</td>
<td>knowledge and relationships with clients and videographer</td>
<td>boundary spanning</td>
<td>collective</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>excessive expectations relative to agency size</td>
<td>reapportion portion of participants per agency</td>
<td>DHCD commitment to program</td>
<td>sensemaking</td>
<td>collective</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>insufficient incentives</td>
<td>increase chances for escrowing mandate participation</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>sensemaking</td>
<td>collective</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>target welfare recipients and JOBLink clients</td>
<td>administrative data for identifying and contacting them</td>
<td>sensemaking boundary spanning</td>
<td>individual</td>
<td>eventually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>welfare reform prevents effective participation</td>
<td>exempt FSS participants from work requirement</td>
<td>understanding of clients, channels of communication to welfare dept. officials</td>
<td>sensemaking</td>
<td>collective</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>develop relationships with Reps</td>
<td>Section 8 Reps contact refuse to cooperate</td>
<td>staff meetings, informal interactions</td>
<td>boundary spanning</td>
<td>individual</td>
<td>for some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Specialized Reps”</td>
<td>agency’s revenue for JOBLink clients</td>
<td>boundary spanning; sensemaking</td>
<td>individual later</td>
<td>collective</td>
<td>for some later</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

intact. Theoretically, accepting limitations allows practitioners to conserve their energy to serve clients in ways that are more feasible – whether by getting the rules right, doing the right thing in particular situations, or by engaging in creative street-level practice to make programs better. The enrollment story suggests that the practitioners are willing to make that effort.
The following chapters examine the self-sufficiency workers’ responses to practice problems where the goals are more ambiguous and hence afford more room for creative reinterpretation. The practitioners also find more “latent potential” among service partners and administrative procedures and structures for exercising the strategies of creative practice.

The practitioners’ responses to the two practice problems explored in the following chapters also allow for informative comparisons between FSS and JOBLink, among the three forums, and across the different practitioners’ practices. The comparisons help to tease out the themes and conjectures about creative street-level practice and the roles of the forum I have begun to address in this chapter’s discussion and conclusion.
CHAPTER 4  
Creative Street-Level Coordination: Doing More with Less

The service referral technology delineated in the FSS program design depends on the willingness and capability of the frontline practitioners to contribute to the work of governance. The practitioners are expected to be responsive to the service needs of each client. They are to discern which services each client requires to achieve her or his self-sufficiency goals and to guide clients through the complex and fragmented service delivery system. In addition, program designs imply that the practitioners will take responsibility for ensuring that their clients actually receive the services they need. This expectation rests on the assumption that the practitioners’ interactions with other service providers will afford clients better access to more resources than they would obtain were they to seek assistance on their own. Rather than merely cope with the practice problems of confusing eligibility requirements, limited accessibility, or inadequate programming, the FSS practitioners are expected to convince their colleagues to use their discretion to “do the right thing” to meet clients’ needs.

The following two chapters explore how the FSS practitioners exercise the strategy of inter-organizational coordination and collaboration to respond to these high expectations. This chapter examines the efforts of members of the nonprofit forum to learn about the services provided in their communities and to develop relationships with their counterparts in those agencies so to improve their clients’ access to existing resources and to expand what is currently available. The following chapter explores how both FSS practitioner discussion forums enhance members’ capacity for creative coordination in their efforts to engage with partners in their own service districts and as a collective.

This chapter describes the findings from an innovative approach to studying the practitioners’ networks of relationships with service partners in other organizations that I designed with one of the FSS practitioners. The first section of the chapter describes this research instrument and how I used it to examine the service networks of each of the FSS practitioners in the eight nonprofit agencies. In the second section, I assess the breadth of the connections in relation to the range of service needs the practitioners identified as essential to their clients’ progress in reaching their self-sufficiency objectives. Comparison across their
reported experiences surfaces the conditions in the practitioners’ organizational and geographic environments that facilitate and hinder these efforts.

In the third section, I identify the specific techniques the practitioners use to improve ongoing FSS practice through connecting with service partners. I analyze the extent to which the practitioners’ accounts of their coordination practices fit the definition of creative street-level practice with respect to the ways they modify established patterns of behavior and the extent to which these changes produce valued gains for clients and programs. My discussion of these findings identifies four categories of creative coordination techniques: 1) those in which FSS practitioners adjust their expectations to accommodate limitations; 2) those that raise their expectations of what partners and clients can provide with existing resources; 3) those in which the FSS practitioners and their partners align their expectations of one another; and 4) those in which all actors raise expectations for programs and policies.

4.1 The Participatory Research Instrument

The investigation of creative street-level coordination described and analyzed in this chapter is a product of a convergence between my research objectives and the nonprofit FSS practitioners’ discussion forum’s decision to advocate with state decision makers for more resources for the services their clients need to achieve economic independence from public assistance. Recognition of our shared goals and complementary competencies led to a joint effort to collect and interpret evidence of how the practitioners have been able to engage potential partners in improving service delivery. The practitioners were interested in establishing that their concerted efforts to coordinate and collaborate with service partners were insufficient to compensate for inadequate investment in job training and supportive services. My priority was to learn how the practitioners pursued these efforts despite their lack of authority and incentives to engage system partners.

Development of the Research Instrument: Figure 4.1 depicts the research instrument we used to collect and analyze the practitioners’ assessments of potential partners in their local service delivery systems and their efforts to engage them in service improvement. The instrument is a product of a discussion I had with Sherry – the FSS practitioner who had volunteered to help me refine the research design -- about why our attempt to use the more conventional survey instrument I had designed for analyzing inter-organizational referral networks proved frustratingly unwieldy.
The original survey instrument included a roster of organizations in each MNPHA agency's district and a set of questions to elicit the practitioners' assessment of the services provided, their characterization of their relationships with the staff of these agencies, and their assessments their efforts to coordinate and collaborate with them. I derived the roster from United Way data bases throughout the state based on the types of services the forum members had identified as critical to their FSS clients. The service areas included job training and placement, education, supportive services such as childcare, transportation, financial literacy and planning, and income and in-kind assistance. (See the appendix for the list of service areas and the types of organizations that are among their networks.)

However, Sherry found it difficult to generalize about her relationships with providers in the abstract. She preferred to recount her experience with specific clients and to qualify her assessments of the adequacy of their services and the strength of her connections with caveats she felt could not be captured with the instrument's five-point scale. While the questions on the form facilitated her efforts to generalize, the vastness of the project seemed daunting and the necessary repetition proved exhausting. Moreover, although like her colleagues, Sherry was committed to the research project and felt she had a vested interest in the results, she could not easily intuit how completion of the survey would improve her understanding of her service network, its limitations, or ways she might work to expand it.

After four hours of data elicitation with little headway towards completing the assessment of Sherry's inventory of connections, we decided to rethink our approach. In the course of discussing what we sought to glean from the research, a preliminary version of Figure 4.1 unfolded on the back of a survey form. The largest, outer rectangle represents the entirety of FSS participants' needs as perceived by the practitioner for the service domain in question. The rectangle labeled "existing services" is somewhat smaller than "participant needs," reflecting the practitioners' observations that available resources are often insufficient to meet demand. That not all participants may be eligible for the existing services is reflected in the next smallest rectangle. Some eligibility criteria may preclude groups of people, such as those who live beyond the partner's catchment area, are no longer eligible for TANF agency supports, have incomes surpassing designated limits, or have some other disqualifying characteristic.

Still smaller is the rectangle circumscribing the subset of services for which participants are
Figure 4.1: The Research Instrument or "Engagement Tool"
eligible that are "commendable, dependable, and accessible."1 Commendable” or competent partner agencies are those where the FSS practitioner senses that their counterparts in the other agencies have the knowledge and skills to provide the quality of services their clients require. Partners who are not “dependable” are those who consistently fail to follow through with the services they promise either because of insufficient funding or because their performance is unpredictable. “Accessibility” refers to the ease of accessing the partners’ service given available means of transportation and the times that the service is offered.

The inner-most and shaded rectangle represents those partners with whom the FSS practitioner has forged a relationship that “adds-value” over and beyond what the participant would receive were she or he to access the service without a referral. The dotted area captures those partners where the FSS practitioner has a personal contact but that relationship has not resulted in additional value that enhances the program or the benefits participants receive upon accessing the service. (Personal connections sometimes led the FSS practitioners to conclude that the partner’s services were not “commendable” and “dependable.”)

Research “Engagements”: With the recognition that this figurative depiction of the practitioners’ service networks helped the practitioner and me to delineate and articulate the objectives of our collective inquiry, I surmised that it might also serve as an actual instrument for data collection.2 I enlarged and reproduced the figure and brought copies of this “engagement tool” to each agency3, one for each of the service needs domains. I began by presenting the diagram in stages, adding each layer of complexity as in the above description. We then discussed what an “added-value” relationship meant to each practitioner drawing from and adding to an initial list I derived from prior fieldwork and interviews.

For each service domain, the FSS practitioner wrote the name of the organization (or

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1 The terms derive from Ronald Ferguson and Sara Stoutland’s (1999) definition of “trust” and Alter and Hage’s (1993) conditions conducive to interorganizational relationships. Additional concepts of compatible goals or motives and sense of collegiality were discussed in the course of eliciting the practitioners’ narratives as described below.

2 This observation was influenced by my understanding of the concept of “boundary objects” (Paul Carlile 2001) in the strategic management literature. “Boundary objects” are devices – such as clay models or auto-cad representations – that facilitate discussion across teams or groups with divergent technical knowledge. In this case, the boundary spanned was that of my researcher’s orientation to depicting interorganizational networks and the practitioners’ experience.

3 In one agency, the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership, I interviewed each of the three FSS case managers separately and then discussed the synthesis of the results of their “engagements” collectively with them and their supervisor. The data presented here reflects the refinements to responses following the group discussion and a separate interview with the supervisor.
particular colleague) in the appropriate rectangle based on her assessment of the services provided and the nature of her relationship. When partners were entered in the shaded “added value” box, we discussed the nature of the contribution as well as how the connection developed and evolved over time. After recording all of the organizations on the diagram, I asked the practitioner to assess the gaps between the “commendable, dependable, and accessible” services and their perception of their participants’ actual needs. We entered these descriptions on the figure to indicate the discrepancies in relation to the perceived quality of available services and eligibility criteria in addition to the prevalence of service providers in each service area. (Figure 4.2 reproduces one of the worksheets with a practitioner’s responses filled in.)

From the filled in diagrams I generated a list of ties to organizations in the social service and workforce development fields categorized into three levels of intensity: (1) those organizations known to provide services of acceptable quality, although the practitioner does not know anyone associated with the program; (2) organizations where the FSS practitioner has a personal connection that does not yield additional benefits for the participant or the program and (3) partners engaged in a value-adding relationship. I sent tables summarizing categorizations of each tie to each practitioner and re-interviewed them to ensure the reliability of the data. In all but very few cases, the second interview confirmed the initial classification of the strength of the connection; all of the exceptions were due either to my clerical errors or to changes in the relationships since the initial interview.

All of the interviews from these “engagements” were recorded, professionally transcribed, and coded with the aid of a textual analysis computer program. Analysis of the transcripts facilitated a more refined categorization of each of the added-value connections according to the ways in which the practitioner felt it added to the participant’s experience or benefited the program itself. In many instances, the practitioners identified several techniques for each connection. I describe this coding and analysis process in the third section of this chapter.

Without exception, the practitioners conveyed that the diagram made intuitive sense and the resulting characterizations accurately and meaningfully captured the essence of their 

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4 I use the feminine pronoun for the sake of parsimony. All but one of the FSS practitioners who participated in these “engagements” was a woman.
5 I use the term “tie” to encompass all of the types of relationships between the FSS practitioners and other service workers, including those that do not involve a personal connection. This language is derived from the definition of “relational tie” as the linkage between actors common in social network analysis (Wasserman and Faust 1994 p. 18).
6 I used Scolari’s Atlas.ti, version 4.3 and followed Richards and Richards’ (1999) approach to computer-assisted qualitative research coding and analysis.
relationships. Unlike the abstract initial survey form, the figure captured the holistic picture we aimed to describe as a result of the analysis. The process also enabled each practitioner to think about her relationships with organizations in the surrounding community (or communities) in a manner that was largely similar to her everyday engagements with program participants. The conversations elicited elaborated both their struggles to make useful connections and their more fruitful efforts. Invariably, the practitioners indicated that they were surprised by how many productive relationships they had developed and that they felt inspired to cultivate additional connections.

4.2 The FSS Practitioners’ Referral Networks: Their Composition, Potential for Service Improvement, and Conditions for Utilization

The results of the inquiry described above indicate that the FSS practitioners have developed extensive service networks despite the aforementioned challenges. As Table 4.1 indicates, the FSS practitioners from the eight nonprofit regional housing agencies collectively refer their clients to nearly 500 organizations that, in their assessments, provide commendable services. They have made personal contacts with potential partners in over 300 of those organizations that together comprise three-fifths of the practitioners’ referral networks. These contacts are the essential first step to exercising the strategy of improving services though inter-organizational coordination and collaboration. Indeed, the practitioners identified three-fifths of these personal contacts – 182 in total – as having contributed to improving the services their clients receive in some way.

The first part of this section describes these referral networks in relation to their potential for employing the strategies of value producing coordination and collaboration. It examines the extent to which the personal contacts and value-adding connections supply the range of needs the practitioners identified as critical to meeting their clients’ self-sufficiency objectives. The second part compares the referral networks across the eight MNPHA agencies to learn about the

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7 Although the data collection tool was designed to collect information about all of the organizations in each of the eight service districts, I confine this analysis to those they consider worthy of referral for at least some of their clients. Each practitioner identified numerous organizations whose services were not considered commendable, dependable, or accessible. They also pointed to particular service needs that are not available, even in poor quality or with overly restrictive eligibility rules or other barriers to access. The explanations for these deficiencies were recorded and transcribed. I do not include these in the enumeration of potential partners because identifying the comprehensive list of those organizations proved considerably more difficult for the practitioners to produce systematically than those with whom they have regular contact. Moreover, none of the organizations so identified were involved in the value-adding relationships that are my primary focus in this chapter.
conditions conducive to identifying potential partners and exercising the strategies of coordination and collaboration.

Table 4.1 Distribution of Types of Relationships with Service Partners
(Whose Services Are Considered Commendable, Dependable, and Accessible)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Relationship</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No personal contacts</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With personal contacts that do not add value</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal contacts that add-value</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Personal Contacts (including those that add value)</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Composition of the Networks in Relation to Clients’ Service Needs

The data collected with the FSS practitioners suggest that they have learned about a wide range of organizations that operate within the service delivery systems beyond their own housing departments and agencies. The networks include local offices of federal agencies such as the local offices of the state’s welfare system known as the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and the public and private contractors who operate the labor force intermediaries or One-Stop Career Centers established by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). The FSS practitioners’ referral networks include all of the state’s Child Care Resource Centers (CCRCs) responsible for authorization and distribution of childcare vouchers and the Access to Jobs agencies dedicated to allocating transportation subsidies to eligible clients and to planning public transit routes for welfare-to-work commuters.

Also prevalent in each practitioner’s network are local offices of national and state nonprofit organizations such as the United Way, the American Red Cross, the Corporation for Public Management that helps low-income people with special needs remain in the community and runs the state’s largest welfare-to-work employment service, the northeast’s Consumer Credit Counseling Centers, legal service agencies, community health and substance abuse rehabilitation centers, local community-based organizations, and church groups who provide an array of supportive and educational services. Several of the practitioners’ networks also tap into resources of community foundations that award small grants to individuals. The private sector appears in only a few of the practitioners’ networks and includes temp agencies, the regional
Workforce Investment Boards designed to promote workforce and economic development and local businesses. None of the practitioners recorded employers within their networks.

The extent to which the referral networks provide the “latent potential” or resources for value-adding relationships depends to a large extent on whether the services network members promise to provide to the FSS clientele are the ones that they require to meet their self-sufficiency goals. Each of the practitioners’ service networks captured through this inquiry included at least some members in every one of the eight needs areas the practitioner’s identified. Each of the practitioners also found personal contacts and forged value-adding connections with organizations in the full range of service areas. However, as Table 4.2 indicates, some types of services are more prominent than others.

**Adult Education and Workforce Development:** Consistent the program’s primary objective to help clients develop their long-term career prospects, the FSS practitioners have made personal contacts with providers of basic adult education and job training and placement services. The networks include all of the One Stop Career Centers and most of the community colleges in the state as well as several of the state universities and private colleges. Together with other providers of GED, ESL, and other basic education classes as well as a range of job training programs, these organizations account for over 200 or one-fifth of the members of the networks across the MNPHA agencies.

Each of the practitioners remarked that these services are not sufficient to meet FSS participants’ needs. In particular, several practitioners noted that Career Center staff is less equipped to respond to FSS participants’ needs than they are to job seekers with more work experience. For this reason, the practitioners recorded some of the Career Centers beyond the “commendable” zone. Practitioners also excluded numerous proprietary training programs from their referral networks because they tend not to be recognized by the TANF agencies for job training credit or subsidies and because tuition cannot be covered by federal Pell grants. In addition, practitioners raised concerns that several of these schools do not guarantee job placement after the training and that the programs are not intensive or rigorous enough to allow graduates to compete with higher skilled applicants. Stories of schools that have gone out of business before participants earn their certificates punctuated the narratives collected through this inquiry. Additional concerns expressed by several of the practitioners include long waiting lists for popular training programs, ineligibility for scholarships or subsidies especially for those
Table 4.2: Strength of Ties Across Clients' Service Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Commendable Dependable, &amp; Accessible Ties</th>
<th>All Personal Contacts</th>
<th>Connections that Add Value</th>
<th>% Personal Contacts of Commendable (within need type*)</th>
<th>% Added Value of All Contacts (within need type*)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=496</td>
<td>N=300</td>
<td>N=182</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Basic Education</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>45 (15%)</td>
<td>21 (12%)</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce Development</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>56 (19%)</td>
<td>31 (17%)</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Counseling</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>45 (15%)</td>
<td>34 (19%)</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare and Youth Services</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>38 (13%)</td>
<td>17 (9%)</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12 (4%)</td>
<td>9 (5%)</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Needs</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>67 (22%)</td>
<td>41 (23%)</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Supports</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>41 (14%)</td>
<td>16 (9%)</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal: Supportive Services</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>153 (52%)</td>
<td>83 (46%)</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff and Program Supports</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>33 (11%)</td>
<td>31 (17%)</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean</td>
<td>74.4</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>median</td>
<td>74.0</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>std dev</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentages on the right-most two columns of the table reflect the proportion of the organizations in each need cluster in relation to the totals for each tie type.
who are not recent TANF recipients, clients’ inadequate prior preparation to succeed in the programs, and the absence of post-training job placement programming.

Despite the acknowledged need to augment and improve these services, the practitioners reported that they had engaged relatively few of partners their contacts in these service domains in the strategies of cooperation and collaboration. They have personal contacts in only about half of the organizations they identified, a fact that may be attributed to the practitioners’ lack of prior experience in the field of workforce development or education. Those who did work with employment and training programs in the past did so before policy changes and budget cuts eliminated the positions of their former colleagues. Moreover, only about half of the personal contacts they have established have led to improvements in practices or available resources.

**Financial Consulting and Education Services:** The practitioners’ connections with partners who provide financial services comprise a relatively portion of their referral networks. However, a relatively high percentage of their personal relationships have led to improvements in the services FSS clients would receive were they to access them on their own. The practitioners have personal contacts in over two-thirds of these agencies and have coordinated or collaborated with over three-fourths of those contacts. This near saturation of connections with potential partners can be attributed to the small number of organizations that work in each of the areas and to the degree of interdependence between them and the FSS program. As I will elaborate in the examples of inter-organizational collaboration later in the chapter, the Consumer Credit Counselors Services (CCCS) that make up a large portion of these ties rely on FSS practitioners for outreach to prospective clients just as the FSS practitioners depend on their expertise for financial counseling.

**Supportive Services:** Organizations that provide supportive services comprise the largest proportion of the practitioners’ referral networks. Taken together, they amount to nearly half of the organizations recorded. Their prevalence reflects the well-documented and widespread need for reliable childcare and transportation, cash and in-kind assistance, and similar services that help families pursue career oriented goals and weather the crises that derail efforts regardless of clients’ determination to succeed. As one practitioner commented at a practitioner discussion forum, “People’s lives are so complicated and they don’t have the support systems that some of us are fortunate enough to have. And sometimes a crisis comes up and they just don’t have the backups.” There are so many of these services in their networks because they are needed and because a plethora of agencies provide such services in every service jurisdiction.
This abundance does not mean, however, that the resources these organizations provide are sufficient. Indeed, practitioners from each agency noted that eligibility requirements often exclude clients who are no longer within a year of having received welfare assistance or who earn more than a minimal income threshold. Also common were critiques about the availability of reliable childcare services, especially for infants and during hours that accommodate late work-shifts or evening courses. Several practitioners also referenced the complexity of the application processes and bemoaned the lack of a single, comprehensive and accurate repository for information on available services and their eligibility criteria.

The FSS practitioners have personal relationships with many of their counterparts in these service areas. Despite the large number of such organizations, they have personal contacts with over two-thirds of the providers. This familiarity reflects their prior work experience in these fields and the proximity of the organizations to their own agencies (or co-location in the case of the CAP agencies). Another way practitioners said they came to know these partners (particularly in the welfare offices) was through the one-on-one interactions often required to ensure that FSS clients obtain the services to which they are entitled. When such interactions were seen as ongoing practices, the practitioners entered them in the shaded “added-value” box of their sheets. Thus inter-agency interactions to improve practice may develop into personal connections as the efforts to “do the right thing” for individual clients become routinized. This relatively subtle example of service improvement is typical of those that have emerged among the supportive service providers; it is in the second of the four categories of value-adding practices I discuss in the following section.

Despite comparatively extensive connections relative to the other service domains, few of these personal contacts have led to service improvement. This finding may be attributed to the relatively limited discretion such providers have over how they provide services and the limited dependency of the partners on FSS for client outreach given the over-abundance of potential consumers of these services. As discussed in the chapter on enrollment, the FSS practitioners cannot offer their potential partners housing subsidies in exchange for preferential access to the services they provide. The one exception are providers of transportation assistance, especially the newly established state-level Access to Jobs initiatives which, according to the narratives, rely on programs such as FSS for marketing their services and depend on the case managers’
knowledge the need for transit services to connect low-income workers’ residences to the range of employment and service destinations.

**FSS Program and Staff Development:** Finally, connections that support staff in program development were, not surprisingly, the least prevalent category within the service networks. Virtually all of these connections are in the value-adding category. All of the practitioners recorded the FSS practitioner discussion forum in the shaded box. Others included the MNPHA association, the DHCD staff, Nan McKay – the for-profit technical assistance provider, and the multi-agency forums which some of the practitioners attend regularly. The role of the FSS forums and the multi-agency groups in establishing personal contacts and value-adding connections is a theme in the following chapter.

**Summary of How Referral Networks Relate to Clients’ Needs:** This characterization of the referral networks in relation to different types of service needs evidences that, even without the authority of a mandate to coordinate or the incentives to compel partners to work together, the FSS practitioners have developed extensive referral networks. Despite the challenges of the fragmented service system, the historical isolation of their agencies, and their lack of experience in the art of networking, they have forged personal connections with many of their counterparts in these organizations and they have engaged them as partners in the work of improving services. Many of these connections link the FSS clients to the services they most need to pursue their goals of achieving self-sufficiency and the value-added through these connections appear to enhance the extent to which they do so.

The fact that the practitioners have developed these networks in the course of FSS practice suggests that they have the capacity to identify potential partners and to learn about the potential for productive partnerships on behalf of their common clientele and shared objectives. Yet the findings also surface questions about the considerable untapped potential for exercising the strategy of inter-organizational coordination and collaboration. Of particular relevance, the practitioners’ referral networks have only limited reach into the fields of employment and career development.

The following section aims to elucidate what is feasible for street-level practitioners to accomplish through these efforts to connect with their counterparts in the service delivery systems. It examines the factors that have enabled some of the practitioners in these eight
MNPHA agencies to develop more extensive networks than others and surfaces the constraints that hinder these efforts to make the most of the “latent potential” for creativity.

**Differences Among Referral Networks and the Conditions Conducive to Making Connections to Improve Services:**

The referral networks of each of the MNPHA FSS practitioners proved to be similar to one another with respect to the types of services they include. This similarity makes sense given the common needs of their clientele. In fact, the recognition of this commonality was the impetus for the forum members’ resolve to join me in this investigation. In addition, federal and state policies result in fairly uniform services and similar providing agencies across the regions. The fact that many of the major nonprofits serve the entire state contributes to this relative homogeneity. As noted above, the practitioners also have relatively similar previous work experience and consequently similar prior contacts with service providers. Moreover, the exchange of information about statewide service partners in the discussion forum helps the FSS practitioners expand their referral networks in similar ways. In fact, the one noteworthy exception to this generalization is the fact that the metropolitan Boston practitioners did not include transportation services in their referral networks because they did not think their clients had difficulty taking advantage of public transit services.⁸

It is against these commonalities that the differentiating characteristics of the eight service delivery systems in which the practitioners practice FSS can be discerned. Comparison of the practitioners’ filled-in diagrams reveals considerable variation across the referral networks with respect to the numbers of organizations identified, personal contacts established, and value-adding connections pursued. (See Figure 4.3 and Table 4.3.) In this section, I examine how four clusters of factors help to explain these differences: the physical and administrative geography of the service districts, the service-orientation of the housing agency, the practitioners’ personal characteristics, and the extent to which there are opportunities for service providers from different organizations to interact with one another (a factor I term cohesion).⁹

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⁸ Interestingly, a survey MBHP conducted after this data was collected indicated that many FSS participants do indeed need transportation assistance, both to address inadequacies of public transit and to access funding for car purchase and repair.

⁹ The jurisdictions of the MNPHA organizations also differ significantly in terms of their demographics, particularly in terms of median incomes, race and ethnicity and, to a lesser extent, the age of the population. I do not examine these differences because of the relatively uniform demographic characteristics of the agencies’ Section 8 and FSS portfolios discussed in the previous chapter. Although differences in race and ethnicity may well influence the experience of FSS participants in accessing available services, I did not examine this influence on the FSS
Physical and Administrative Geography: A first glance at Figure 4.4 and Table 4.3 might lead one to surmise that the more densely populated regions of the state have the largest service referral networks. The referral network of the Metropolitan Boston FSS practitioners includes 91 organizations, nearly twice that of the mostly rural Berkshires. This finding is not surprising given the vast difference in the population size of the two regions and the corresponding number of organizations available to serve them. The Boston metropolitan area comprises 48% of the state’s population whereas only 2% of Massachusetts’ residents live in the Berkshires. The Boston region also includes a relatively large number of administrative districts for the commonly accessed services including six local welfare offices, seven One Stop Career Centers, and two community colleges (with three locations). In contrast, at the time of this study, the Berkshires had only two welfare offices and only one each of the other services.

Consistent with this observation, the regions that include the state’s second-tier cities of Worcester and Springfield -- Worcester county and Western Massachusetts -- have among the largest referral networks. The number of organizations to which the practitioners in these regions refer FSS clients is roughly proportional to the size of their service districts. RHI’s referral network accounts for 12% of all of the organizations the practitioners identified collectively, a percentage equivalent to Worcester County’s share of the state’s population. HAP’s practitioner identified 15% of the service providers conveyed in the totals while Western Massachusetts is home to 11% of the state’s residents. These regions also have a relatively large number of local welfare offices, One Stop Career Centers, and community colleges.

Nor is this association between the size of the referral networks and population concentration confined to regions with large urban centers. The South Shore has a predominantly sub-urban settlement configuration, yet its referral network is proportionately about the same as its share of the population (16% and 14% respectively). Affirming the practitioners’ efforts to forge connections. Racial and ethnic discrimination was a topic of discussion in the forums, yet it was not raised in relation to their service referral networks. Due to the paucity of relationships with employers, I not addressed the considerable regional differences in industries and unemployment rates. (For analysis of regional differences see the reports produced by the University of Massachusetts’ Donahue Institute’s Economic and Public Policy Research [http://www.massbenchmarks.org/regions/regions.htm, last accessed February 7, 2008]).

10 The actual number of organizations to which MBHP refers its clients would be even larger if I had included the lists the practitioners compiled of agencies that provide basic services and adult education courses.

11 These figures are based on census data analyzed by the University of Massachusetts’ Donahue Institute’s Economic and Public Policy Research noted above. Note that their data groups the suburbs and towns west of Boston in that region that are part of SMOC’s service district – the smallest of the eight agencies -- yet the disparity is nevertheless striking.
### Table 4.3: Strength of Ties Across the FSS Coordinators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Commendable Dependable, &amp; Accessible</th>
<th>Personal Contacts (includes value-adding)</th>
<th>Value-Adding Connections</th>
<th>% Personal Contacts of Agency Total</th>
<th>% Added Value of Agency Contacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berkshires: Tina</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Shore: Iciar</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Cod – Ruth</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hampden-Hampshire: Sherry, Luz</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Boston: Jenn, Marshall, Luz, Rebecca</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worcester County: Kathleen</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Middlesex: Deidre</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Shore: Janine, Joanne</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>494</td>
<td><strong>101%</strong></td>
<td>300</td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mean</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>median</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>stnd dev.</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4.3 Types of Ties by Agency
correlation between the size of the network and the administrative geography, the South Shore’s five counties have a correspondingly large number of local agencies in the core service domains referenced in Table 4.4.

However, it would be inaccurate to infer from these data that urban concentration, population size, and the number of administrative districts provide sufficient explanation for the differences in the capacity to make inter-organizational connections. Counter to this explanation, MBHP’s share of the total number of organizations recorded across the eight agencies is not proportional to the size of the region’s population; the referral agencies its FSS practitioners identified account for only 18% of the cross-agency total, a proportion vastly smaller than its share of the state’s total population. In contrast, the Berkshires’ referrals account for 10% of the total.

Moreover, the size of the referral networks has not proven to translate directly into the capacity to forge personal connections for improving services. The Boston-based FSS practitioners’ personal contacts account for only 12% of the MNPHA total and only 9% of the connections that add value to the services provided. The practitioners serving Springfield and Worcester and their surrounding areas forged such connections with a roughly comparable number of organizations. In contrast, those operating in the less populated Berkshires and Cape have similar or even somewhat larger number of contacts and their efforts yielded a considerable larger portion of the connections that improve services (17% and 16% respectively). The practitioners in the sub-urban areas also significantly exceeded both their urban and rural counterparts in making personal contacts and working with them to add value. In sum, these aspects of the MNPHA regions’ geography account for some, yet certainly not all, of the variation.

**Organizational Differences:** Another plausible explanation for the differences in the referral networks pertains to the agencies in which the FSS practitioners work. Although their Section 8 programs operate under similar regulations and administrative routines and the senior staff meet with one another as MNPHA members, the agencies vary to some extent in the scope of services offered in addition to housing. Each of the agencies has programs that provide housing or shelter assistance to special needs populations such as elderly, homeless and formerly, and variously abled populations. While those programs focus on meeting clients’ housing needs, they also entail coordination and collaboration with other service providers that
Table 4.4 Characteristics of the Massachusetts Nonprofit Housing Agencies’ Service Jurisdictions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Service Area (counties)</th>
<th>Population in 2000a</th>
<th>Settlement Type</th>
<th>No. of Local Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>one small city, small towns and rural</td>
<td>DTA (Welfare Offices)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berkshire Housing, Inc (BHSI)</td>
<td>Berkshire</td>
<td>134,953 2%</td>
<td>small towns, rural</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Training, Inc. (CTI)</td>
<td>Northern Essex, Northern Middlesex</td>
<td>588,639 9%</td>
<td>urban centers and small town</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Assistance Corporation (HAC)</td>
<td>Barnstable, Dukes, Nantucket</td>
<td>246,737 4%</td>
<td>small towns, rural</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hampden Hampshire Housing Partnership (HAP)</td>
<td>Hampshire, Hampden, Franklin</td>
<td>695,368 11%</td>
<td>urban centers, small towns</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership (MBHP)</td>
<td>Boston, Metro Boston</td>
<td>3,015,981 48%</td>
<td>urban-metropolitan</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Housing, Inc. (RHI)</td>
<td>Worcester</td>
<td>773,220 12%</td>
<td>one large city, small towns, rural</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC)</td>
<td>Southern Middlesex included in Metro Boston Region</td>
<td></td>
<td>suburban</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Shore Housing Development Corp. (SSHDC)</td>
<td>Plymouth and Bristol</td>
<td>894,200 14%</td>
<td>suburban, small cities and towns</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

are potential resources for the FSS program as well. Although as noted above, these services are primarily in the areas of basic supports rather than education and workforce development. The three multi-service agencies (or Community Action Programs) offer an even broader array of services and the advantage of their location in the same buildings as the FSS programs would seem to enhance the potential for cross-program interaction.

The findings from this research, affirm that the multi-service agencies made somewhat more personal contacts and value-adding connections with regional partners in the areas of basic supportive services than did their counterparts and they did so to a somewhat lesser extent with providers of adult basic education (ESL and GED rather than other educational services). However, as the figure and table convey, the service networks of SMOC, CTI, and RHI practitioners are certainly not among the better connected of the agencies and they have not developed a greater number of service improving relationships than their more housing oriented counterparts.

**Practitioner Characteristics:** Other plausible explanations for the cross-agency differences concern the personal characteristics of the practitioners and how their responsibilities are configured and supported in their respective agencies. (See Table 4.5.) Although the practitioners are similar to one another in having forged most of their personal contacts with potential partners in the course of helping FSS clients, they differ with respect to how long they have been involved with the program. Length of tenure is positively correlated with all measures of the breadth and intensity of ties with other service providers; those who have been in the role longer have had more chance to develop personal contacts and to find ways of improving services with their partners.

For example, at the time this part of the research was conducted, Janine had been working with FSS practitioners on the South Shore for eight years, longer than any of the others in the group, and had developed the most extensive network in terms of personal contacts and service-improving connections. Tina joined the FSS program in the Berkshires one year after Janine, and despite the relatively small size of that service delivery system, her referral network is also among the most connected and value-generating, both in absolute numbers of contacts and with respect to the proportion of her contacts with whom she has engaged in improving services. On

12 The data for SSHDC reflects Janine’s connections as well as those of Joanne who had only recently joined Janine to staff the FSS program. Unlike the separate forms filled out by each of MBHP’s FSS practitioners, Janine and Joanne filled in theirs collectively, in a manner that reflected their integrated division of labor at that time.
the other end of the spectrum, is Iciar, the most recently hired FSS practitioner who had been in the role at CTI for only about six months at the time of this inquiry. Consistent with the idea that inter-organizational connections require time to develop, Iciar had the smallest referral network by all measures.

Table 4.5: Agency and Practitioner Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BHSI</th>
<th>CTI</th>
<th>HAC</th>
<th>HAP</th>
<th>MBHP</th>
<th>RHI</th>
<th>SMOC</th>
<th>SSHDC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staff Resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAP Agency?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of FSS staff</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case load per full staff</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>equivalent: actual enrollment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case load per full staff equivalent: minimum program size</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure in position (years)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of FSS staff in position since inception</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a. Figures are for 2002, at the time this part of the research was conducted.

b. Number of full-time equivalents adjusted to account for additional responsibilities.

c. Figures for MBHP, HAP, and SSHDC represent the number of years the lead FSS practitioner has been in the position.

d. RHI (now RCAP Solutions) is part of an agency with a broader service mission.

Yet the time to develop inter-organizational connections is not a sufficient explanation for the variation. Deidre replaced her predecessor at SMOC at roughly the same time as Iciar became an FSS practitioner. However, despite her relatively small service jurisdiction in the towns and suburbs west of Boston, she identified considerably more organizations and developed more personal contacts with providers than did Iciar. One explanation for this contrast is the fact that Iciar’s caseload of FSS clients was almost twice as large as Deidre’s (and would have been two and a half times as large enrollment reached its targeted level). The burden of serving so many clients clearly consumes time that might otherwise be directed towards exploring the potential for additional relationships with service partners, especially in the widely dispersed geography of the North Shore’s small towns and medium-sized cities.
Countering this explanation, other practitioners with high caseloads have among the most extensive referral networks. Although SSHDC has by far the most clients per full-time staff equivalents, I have already noted that Janine and her newer colleague have surpassed many of their peers in working with service partners. So too have those in HAP and RHI who have extensive networks despite large caseloads as well as the geographic constraints noted above and the fact that both practitioners had been in the role for relatively short periods at the time of data collection. Apparently, high caseloads can also be conducive to forging connections; more clients may result in greater contact between the FSS practitioners and partner agencies.

Nor do differences in Iciar and Deidre's approach to working with their clients seem to account for the disparity in their capacity to connect with their service partners. Some FSS practitioners encourage their clients to find the services they need to fulfill their self-sufficiency objectives on their own, with minimal specific referrals as a means to develop skills in taking initiative and advocating on their own behalf. Marshall, who explained this case management approach to me as we filled in his service network figures, had far fewer organizations in his network and fewer personal contacts than his peers at MBHP who adopt a more "hands-on" or "enabling" approach to case management. In contrast, the narratives both Iciar and Deidre told about how their personal contacts improved service provision evidence that they share similar dedication to finding the appropriate services for each client and advocating on their behalf when necessary.

Where Iciar's and Deidre's experiences seem to diverge more significantly is in the nature of the support they receive from others in their agencies. Although both CTI and SMOC are multi-service Community Action Programs, Deidre has had opportunities to form more strategic connections across departments than Iciar. Through SMOC's albeit short-lived initiative to inform staff about the agency's array of programs, Deidre met her colleagues who offer educational, job placement, and fuel assistance services and later worked with them to improve services for FSS clients. In contrast, Iciar came into contact with her colleagues in CTI's programs more haphazardly, in the course of the hours she spent at the reception desk on top of her FSS work. Although Iciar noted that these personal contacts, especially with those who work with victims of domestic violence, provided her a more collegial support system within the agency, they afforded relatively few opportunities to improve access the services her clients need for finding employment and career development.
Indeed, the fact that Iciar was obligated to devote time at the reception desk rather than to FSS program development is indicative of the relatively low priority her supervisors granted the FSS program. Although her predecessors had established more working relationships with other CTI program providers, their frustration with the lack of support was among the reasons they left CTI for other positions. Iciar’s continued contact with two of these former staff members was instrumental in helping her establish personal connections with regional service providers even years after they had left CTI. In contrast, Deidre’s supervisor, whose dedication to FSS we witnessed in the previous chapter in his role as Chair of the FSS practitioner discussion forum, provided Deidre considerable support in forging connections with other service providers. Not only did he give her recommendations for referrals; he also initiated SMOC’s FSS program’s participation in the multi-agency workforce development partnership I describe in the next section of this chapter.

*Degree of Service Delivery System Cohesion:* The contrast between Iciar’s and Deidre’s efforts to connect with service partners calls attention to the value of opportunities for interaction with potential partners for coordination and collaboration in addition to their prevalence and the physical proximity to one another within their organizations. Comparison across the practitioners’ referral networks suggests that a similar dynamic operates in relation to the regional service delivery systems in which the practitioners operate. The four regions where the practitioners have developed value-adding connections with the highest proportion of their potential partners share a common characteristic. They afford opportunities for joint exploration of mutual goals, complementary resources, and other interdependencies. Each region exhibits different types of what I call the *cohesion* of the service delivery system.

The organizations that serve the residents of the Berkshires, the most rural of the MNPHA districts, tend to be concentrated in the region’s largest town of Pittsfield, with a few satellite offices in small town of North Adams, a short distance to its north. The proximity of these services to one another allowed Tina to interact with her counterparts in other agencies informally. Although Tina has been connecting her clients to services for a long time, she noted that it did not take long for her to get acquainted with other system actors. In her words, “In the Berkshires, everyone knows everyone. We (service providers) know each other and we know one another’s clients or their families.” In addition to the chance interactions, several of the agencies in Tina’s referral networks convene with one another when they need to make decisions
about effective allocation of scarce resources or where to introduce new services. Such meetings are more informal than the Program Coordinating Committees (PCCs) specified in the FSS program regulations. They meet in response to specific needs rather than at regular times and participants vary according to the nature of the decision. Although Tina has established a formal PCC "on paper," she has found that convening its members is unnecessary as they have other chances to interact.

In contrast to the compact Berkshires, service providers on Cape Cod and the islands are dispersed over too large a geographic area for informal networks to afford opportunities for inter-agency interaction. Moreover, the small size of the service districts often means that small towns lack sufficient economies of scale to meet needs on their own. For this reason, numerous coalitions and task forces have emerged for representatives from the region's service providers to coordinate budget requests and coordinate service provision. While Ruth inherited an active PCC from her predecessors in the FSS role, her participation in such regional inter-organizational forums has introduced her to additional partners for service improvement. Ruth was also able to develop a wide array of personal contacts and value-adding connections during her relatively short term in the FSS position because her supervisor nominated her to participate in the Cape's Community Leadership Institute. According to Ruth, this opportunity was invaluable for forging connections, "because instead of me having to go out to all these different people that provide services to the community, they came into my classroom for a half a year." The fact that Ruth had the opportunity to participate in this forum illustrates the combined contribution of support systems within her agency and within the region.

Sherry developed her referral networks in the entirely different service configuration of western Massachusetts. With its span of two counties and several small cities in addition to the dominant city of Springfield, the region is too large for either informal networks of the Berkshires or the region-wide consortiums of the Cape. Nor was Sherry able to sustain a regularly meeting PCC among providers across the administrative districts. Instead, Sherry established many of her connections through her involvement with two pre-existing forums for service providers to network with one another. Springfield hosted one of the only local Welfare Advisory Boards specified in the state's welfare reform legislation. Sherry began to attend these monthly meetings shortly after we conducted this part of the research and it was there that she developed connections with providers of Springfield's array of emergency assistance resources,
workforce development programs, and adult education classes. Sherry also regularly attended the sessions of the Springfield-based Human Services Council where she heard presentations on policy reforms, new service programs, and professional development topics.

Participation in both of these forums not only expanded Sherry’s knowledge of how other programs operate; they also introduced her to many of the colleagues with whom she later worked to improve services. It is perhaps for this reason that she was able to engage as high a percentage of her personal contacts in adding value to routine service provision as did Tina in the informally connected Berkshires. This observation is especially striking given that, of all her peers, Sherry has personal contacts with the fewest of the organizations to which she refers her clients, a finding that reflects the fact that many organizations in her network serve clients outside of Springfield where the majority of those who frequent the two forums operate.

Moreover, her involvement with the Welfare Advisory Board and Human Services Council afforded Sherry opportunities to interact with decision-makers in these organizations as well as her street-level counterparts. In Sherry’s words, she was able to “network on a higher level.” Connections forged at these meetings were critical to several of the new program elements I describe in the analysis of the value-adding mechanisms as well as several of her creative ideas that never received sufficient support from her supervisors or her peers in the practitioner discussion forum.

The suburban South Shore illustrates one final form of cohesion. Potential service partners are scattered across two large counties connected by traffic congested arteries. This diffusion posed the same challenges to establishing the FSS PCC that Sherry and her predecessors faced in western Massachusetts. In the absence of existing forums such as those in Springfield or the Cape, Janine exercised ingenuity in establishing four PCCs, one for each service area. Janine also took advantage of the widespread confusion among service providers during the onset of the state’s welfare reform, soon after she joined the FSS program. Janine’s PCC provided a rare venue for learning about the new law and the many changes and new provisions that reverberated across service domains as a result. This shared sense of urgency created an interdependency among providers that might not have been as apparent in more a more stable policy climate. Janine also formalized the partners’ commitment to the PCC by requiring each member to sign a non-binding, mostly symbolic Memorandum of Understanding. The custom of providing breakfasts at each of the quarterly meetings, also helps to explain the longevity of
these groups when other early PCCs have long since disbanded. According to Janine, people come for the food as well as the information and the sense of camaraderie that has developed over the years. Indeed, this custom and sense of commitment may explain why all four of these PCCs continue to meet years after Joanne replaced Janine in SSHDC's FSS program.

These forms of cohesion – informal networks, existing service provider forums, and those the FSS practitioners created -- provided organizing structures appropriate for exploring common interests, complementary resources, and shared dedication to clients and one another as the basis for value-adding interactions. The practitioners in the other four MNPHA agencies did not find such opportunities for recognizing and exploiting inter-dependencies in their service regions. The dispersed towns and mid-sized cities of the North Shore did not offer Iciar a comparable set of coalitions and task forces to those on the Cape. Nor did she find a convener of service providers in Lowell or Lawrence comparable to those in Springfield. With her high caseload and additional responsibilities, Iciar was unable to re-activate the PCCs established by her predecessors. RHI's location in the small town of Winchendon at northern tip of Worcester county was not conducive to any of these organizing structures. Before this inquiry, however, the previous FSS practitioner overcame these constraints to establish the public transit coalition in the southeastern corner of the county I describe in the following section. In the time since I collected this data, RHI has moved its headquarters to the more central location of Gardner and expanded its activities in its Worcester office. These developments may have expanded opportunities for networking beyond those reflected in these data.

The small scale of SMOC's region may be less conducive to these organizing forms than its larger counterparts, yet the aforementioned multi-agency workforce development partnership I describe in the next section indicates the potential for task-oriented coalitions similar to that of RHI's transit project. At the other extreme, MBHP's FSS practitioners face the challenges of metropolitan Boston's extensive service concentration and numerous venues for information exchange among state headquarters as well as city-wide service partners. MBHP's previous FSS coordinator attended such forums during the periods of policy flux of welfare reform and the introduction of the WIA Act. She also played a key role in an interagency collaborative dedicated to devising a workforce development program that subsequently evolved into an inter-departmental group focused on promoting referrals of Section 8 tenants to the FSS program and its case management resources. In the context of the relatively stable external environment at the
time these data were collected led to the decision to focus on the many internal changes within
the agency.

**Summary of the Factors Influencing the Capacity to Establish Value-Adding Referral Networks:**

The comparison of the practitioners’ referral networks suggests that all four sets of factors
have at least some influence on these street-level practitioners’ capacity to meet potential
partners for coordination and collaboration and to forge relationships that do, in their assessment,
improve the services their clients receive. Although the sample size is not large enough to gauge
the relative explanatory power of each factor or their combined effects, these observations do
point to several initial generalizations about the feasibility of frontline service coordination that
warrant further investigation in future research.

Findings suggest that the larger the size of the service jurisdiction, the greater are the
prospects for identifying potential partners for quality referrals and service improving efforts.
Those service delivery systems that are widely dispersed across physical and administrative
expanses mitigate the practitioners’ capacity to engage with potential partners unless they find or
establish mechanisms to address this challenge. Findings also indicate that co-location of
services (as in the multi-service agencies) is not in itself sufficient to facilitate inter-
programmatic connections unless there are mechanisms to facilitate interaction, whether formal
or informal.

Other findings surface factors that managers can address in order to enhance street-level
workers’ capacity to network with their service counter-partners. Within service agencies,
organizational supports in the form of reasonable case-loads, avenues for communication with
current of former staff members, and opportunities for training and leadership development
helped several of these practitioners overcome challenges of isolation and inexperience. Within
service delivery systems, organizing structures that afford interaction among providers from
diverse fields enhanced information about available services and provided opportunities for
relationships that have led to service delivery improvement. Moreover, the findings also suggest
that some street-level practitioners can seek out such venues or establish them on their own.

Another observation is that networking capacity increases with experience. This finding
points to the costs of turnover in such positions, especially when new hires lack relevant prior
experience and previously established professional relationships. As the following section will
show, this factor is particularly relevant for the techniques of creative coordination that depend on sharing responsibility with partners.

One factor this research did not examine systematically is the effects of practitioners' personal traits or aptitude for networking. The practitioners who joined me in filling out the figures and discussing their efforts to connect with their service district counterparts certainly differ with respect to their inclination to initiate contact with potential partners, their capacity for learning how existing resources might be accessed and used in novel ways, and their skills in persuading partners to join them in those efforts. Although these personal traits may explain much of the variation across the networks presented above, like the physical characteristics of the service geography, they are difficult to alter directly. Thus to assess how ordinary street-level service workers - with a full range of personalities -- might engage in the strategies of coordination and collaboration, I now turn to the analysis of what these practitioners did to lead them to record their partners in the shaded box representing added-value and to describing what kinds of improvements their efforts yielded.

4.3 The Techniques of Creative Street-Level Coordination

In this section, I analyze the practitioners' explanations of why they recorded some of their personal contacts in the shaded-box of the diagrams reserved for connections that add value to the service clients would receive were they to approach those agencies on their own. The practitioners recounted what they felt the clients and the program gained as a result of the personal connection and in what ways the interaction involved changing routine procedures. Their accounts of these practices surfaced the specific techniques the practitioners employed in exercising the strategies of coordination and collaboration.

The taxonomy of techniques derived from an iterative process of coding and analysis of the interview transcripts with input from the practitioners. I began the coding process with reference to the mechanisms for adding value the practitioners had identified in interviews prior to the "engagements" as well as those that surfaced in their narratives. After consolidating the common themes into distinct types of techniques, I reviewed the tables of classifications with each practitioner. I integrated the practitioners' qualifications from these follow-up interviews
into the delineation of each type in an additional iteration of coding.\textsuperscript{13} This process resulted in the identification of 14 techniques of adding value that appear in Table 4.6.

In one final stage of analysis, I grouped these techniques in relation to the two facets of the definition of creative street-level practice explicated in previous chapters: the degree to which they entail changes in ongoing practice (novelty) and the extent to which they increase access to existing resources or produce new resources for the clients and program (value). This step resulted in the four categories depicted in Table 4.6. The categories also reflect how the practitioners use the techniques of interacting with their partners to shift their partners’, their clients’, and their own expectations of what is feasible to provide in light of the constraints of existing resources and the limited influence of the street-level status.

These four categories provide the framework for the following presentation. I describe and illustrate the techniques included in each category and then assess them in relation to the definition of creative street-level practice and the work of governance. I also analyze the practitioners’ narratives to discern which resources – or in Bardach’s terminology, the “latent potential” for interorganizational collaboration – they put to use to make joint effort worthwhile. Using the conceptual framework outlined in my explication of the strategy in Chapter 1, I explain how each category of techniques relates to the perceived interdependency between FSS and partners’ programs and different approaches to coordination. (Table 4.6 also guides this discussion.)

**Category I: Adapting to Partners’ Practices and Adjusting Expectations**

The first category of techniques for adding value through personal connections encompasses the practitioners’ adaptations to their own practices in response to what they learned from interacting with their service partners. The four techniques in this category appeared most frequently in the practitioners’ narratives: 63% of their connections add value using one or more of these techniques. Improving the practitioners’ understanding of available programs, increasing clients’ comfort in accessing these services, affording them more personalized attention once they are there, and streamlining the bureaucratic process all entail changes in the

\textsuperscript{13} This process led me to consolidate some of the techniques. I found disagreement in the value assessment of only two of the techniques. As I note below, some of the practitioners did not consider joint case-management or awarding preferential status to FSS participants to be strategies for improving ongoing practice for the entire clientele. I decided to include these with those caveats because several of the practitioners felt strongly that they do fit the operational definition of improvement to service delivery.
Table 4.6: Techniques of Creative Street-Level Coordination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Techniques</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>program understanding</td>
<td>communication</td>
<td>integrated expertise</td>
<td>collaboration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>client comfort</td>
<td>partners' accountability</td>
<td>preferential status</td>
<td>advocacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personalized attention</td>
<td>clients' accountability</td>
<td>resource exchange</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>streamlined bureaucracy</td>
<td>case sharing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bureaucracy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>114 partners (63%)</td>
<td>71 partners (39%)</td>
<td>110 partners (60%)</td>
<td>37 partners (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in Behavior (novelty)</td>
<td>FSS practitioners (and clients) adjust routines</td>
<td>Both FSS practitioners and partners adjust routines</td>
<td>Both FSS practitioners and partners adopt new practices</td>
<td>Both FSS practitioners and partners create new programs or change existing ones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in Resources for FSS</td>
<td>no change</td>
<td>no change</td>
<td>existing resources diverted to FSS</td>
<td>new resources introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients and Program (value)</td>
<td>better access</td>
<td>better quality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latent Potential</td>
<td>knowledge</td>
<td>shared goals, clients, norms &amp; values</td>
<td>compatible goals, target population, complementary skills and resources</td>
<td>compatible goals, target population, complementary skills and resources, new funding sources, institutional obligations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdependency</td>
<td>unilateral</td>
<td>mutual, reciprocal</td>
<td>outcome</td>
<td>transformative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordination</td>
<td>administrative coordination</td>
<td>administrative coordination</td>
<td>cooperation</td>
<td>collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors Involved</td>
<td>solo: FSS practitioners</td>
<td>dyads: FSS practitioners &amp; partners in relation to clients</td>
<td>multiple: FSS and multiple partners in the service delivery system</td>
<td>multiple: FSS and multiple partners in the system of governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in Expectations</td>
<td>FSS Practitioners and Clients Adjust Their Own Expectations</td>
<td>FSS Practitioners Raise Expectations of Partners and Clients</td>
<td>FSS Practitioners and Partners Align Expectations of One Another</td>
<td>FSS Practitioners and Partners Raise Expectations for Programs and Policies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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14 Percentages represent the proportion of partners engaged in this category of creative street-level coordination out of the 182 value-adding personal connection. As each connection may entail more than one type of technique, the totals add up to more than 100%.


FSS coordinators' practices rather than changes in that of their partners. According to the FSS practitioners, these techniques improve service delivery in that they help them to direct clients to more of what is already available and to guide them in that pursuit more efficiently, effectively, and in Eugene Bardach's term—"purposively."

**Improved Understanding of Social Service Programs:** One way the FSS practitioners said their personal connections help them to improve clients' access to existing services is by enhancing their understanding of program requirements so that they can refer participants more efficiently and design more effective service plans. Ruth explains this aspect of her practice of creative coordination when she discussed her relationship with a colleague at Access to Jobs, the transportation assistance program.

My plan as a networker is to give people the correct information, and sometimes I might have an idea of what it is, but I'm not 100% sure, so I do the phone calling first. That's helped a lot. These people are very inventive. They have resources that they tell me about, but I don't always have all of the details. (P7: 196-201).

While Ruth's comment illustrates how personal connections help confirm the validity and comprehensiveness of her information about the availability of services, Deidre's connection with a staff person who runs an educational program for adults with learning disabilities helps her clarify complex eligibility rules.

I've dealt with her a lot. I think that's been a pretty valuable connection, because I knew who to go to. ... She really felt, "This is the way you need to do it" and explained all the rules. I mean, before I was just kind of trying to get into contact with this other person who was there before her, and it was really difficult to find out who was eligible for that money. (P6: 438-55).

Deidre's account also reveals that some personal contacts are more useful than others and that turnover can occasionally lead to better informal connections if newcomers replace more reluctant partners.

The narratives also suggest that personal connections improve understanding by clarifying misunderstandings about how the partners' programs operate. For example, Luz recounted a story of helping a frustrated participant access an employment and training program advertised in materials received through her agency after her initial application was rejected. According to the flier, the participant seemed eligible. Only after speaking with the staff person she contacted
through a co-worker’s reference was Luz able to clarify the procedures necessary to qualify for admission to the program.

Well I guess the way I was reading the flier, the information was not there. But then when I talked to the contact person there she said that if she comes in and meets the low-income requirements that we have (she’ll be eligible). But also there was another step to it. She needed to meet with people from Career Link (the One Stop Career Center) in order to qualify for the program. So there’s like another whole different agency involved. So if she would have met with the Career Link people, she would have qualified. I guess they work together and Career Link was supposed to refer her to them, to the program. So in order for her to qualify, she would have to do all these steps, meet with the Career Link staff, and from there she would be eligible for that program.

Luz indicated that this understanding of the procedures, will allow her to guide future participants seeking this training program so that they will not face the frustration of initial rejection.

Learning through interactions with partners as exemplified by Luz’ experience does not always come with the high costs of frustration. This excerpt from my discussion with Joanne shows how her improved understanding of the financial aid system of a local community college helped her address an individual client’s needs more expediently and subsequently allowed her to create a template to be used with other participants in the future.

JOANNE: And the office over there for financial aid was wonderful. … (She) gave me this whole spiel about the person who was in debt and her loan was in default and what she needed to do. She spelled it out for me step by step. I wrote a letter and called the person (the client) and then she sent it to them in writing. And I told her, “This is the way you do it.”

LAURIE (researcher): And now can you take those same steps and help someone else?

JOANNE: Absolutely. I have it in writing. I changed the name on the top of the letter and I change a couple of lines and I send it off to the next person who needs it. (908:922)

The information gained through personal connections also informs the practitioners’ work with FSS participants by allowing them to devise service plans that respond creatively to the challenges posed by the state’s “work first” welfare reform strategy. For example, Sherry explained that her understanding of unemployment benefits as a result of her interactions with
colleagues in the Department of Employment and Training enables her to devise career building strategies with participants who want to pursue education and training yet cannot manage the time constraints with their existing work and childcare burdens. She advises them to seek seasonal employment despite low wages and lack of job security so that upon being laid off, they will have accumulated enough time on the job to qualify for unemployment benefits to support them and their families through more intensive training or education programs. This manipulation of regulations does not technically violate rules for accessing unemployment benefits, an assessment confirmed by Sherry’s peers in the practitioner discussion forum, many of whom have also adopted the practice to help FSS participants pursue higher degrees.

Finally, information gleaned through interacting with colleagues supplements their assessment of the quality of services offered throughout the delivery system. For example, Deidre learned about a new transportation assistance program from a colleague at the Regional Employment Board when she expressed her frustration that the one to which she usually referred her clients had closed its doors. Similarly, Iciar often consults with the director of an agency that is compiling a comprehensive directory for social service providers in the North Shore when she needs recommendations for services for particular clients.

**Enhanced Clients’ Comfort and Personal Attention:** All of the practitioners agreed that referrals to a provider with whom they have a personal relationship make their clients feel more comfortable about accessing the service and may mean that they receive more personalized attention once they arrive. As Deidre related:

> Yeah, I do think it makes them feel more comfortable, that they aren't just going to this place, and nobody knows that they're coming, and they don't have an idea of who they should talk to or what to expect. I think it’s a lot more comfortable, and they’re a lot more willing to go. A lot of programs are just intimidating…any of them, you know. (P6: 26-31)

Others emphasized that this feeling of comfort is especially helpful where participants suffer from low self-esteem and are reluctant to ask for assistance. Joanne explained:

> [We have] a good connection with the people at the Plymouth CAP agency where they can go for fuel assistance… There’s no difference in the outcome. But if someone is applying late, it could speed it up. A lot of it will be them (the clients) going out and doing it on their own but they don't have the self-esteem to ask for help. The connection helps us hand-hold better. You can say, "I know Sharon and I'll give her a call." and that makes it easier for them to go down and see her and not be so nervous. (P1: 1189:96).
This type of value-adding connection does not necessarily augment the amount of services and benefits clients receive, especially where resources are in scarce supply and where partners have little discretion over how they are allocated. For example, in response to my question about whether the participants are more likely to receive childcare assistance as a result of her personal connections with agency staff, Luz responded:

> Well not really. I don’t think that they’re more likely to get a voucher because it’s like standard procedures for everyone that goes there. But maybe it will give the family that goes there a little more comfortableness, because I know the person. Probably they will think that they’ll get it right away. ... They won’t get it faster. Like I said, there are guidelines that they have to follow, the procedures. (342-51)

Nevertheless, the practitioners emphasize that participants benefit from knowing that the referral is based on an assessment of the quality of the services provided rather than an arbitrarily selected from a list of appropriate programs. This effect is apparent in Luz’s account of how her connections facilitated referral of a participant who was initially reluctant to leave her children in childcare in order to begin a new job.

> I think it helps because I know the program. I know it’s a quality program. I know that I’m referring the clients to a good start, to a good place, that they’re going to be pleased with the program. That if I refer them there, they will go on to continue their education; they will have no, I guess, barriers going on. ... Because if the mother knows that it’s a good place for the child, (and) if I tell her that this is a great place, I know this lady, she’ll be comfortable in leaving the child there. (259-85)

Interestingly, Luz speaks not only of her clients’ increased feeling of ease, but also of her own sense of satisfaction about making an effective and meaningful referral. In an environment characterized by uncertain, variable, and frequently inadequate service quality, such knowledge gives Luz feedback and assurance she often lacks. Ruth’s description of her connections with the Career Center and Department of Employment and Training further evidences this sense of confidence that the personal connection adds to her practice of referring clients to services, even as she acknowledges that this assessment is validated subjectively, based on a sense of personal trust rather than a systematic test of outcomes.

> Well, it adds value because I actually do know some people down there. I go down there often. We refer people. I don’t know, maybe it doesn’t add value. I haven’t tested it to the point to see if somebody got better service because I think they’re doing a darn good job, period. I just know when I started working here, I actually went down there and met the director, and he showed me around. (P7: 910-15)
Other explanations point to how such personal relationships allow the FSS practitioners to direct their clients to partners who are more likely to understand their needs. For example, Joanne advises her participants to visit the Plymouth Career Center on the days her personal connection is working because she knows that this practitioner is particularly sensitive to the needs of less experienced job seekers and those who are less familiar with computerized systems. The absence of such personalized guidance is among the reasons other FSS practitioners gave for refraining from directing participants to Career Centers, despite the absence of alternatives.

In several cases, such personalized attention is a response to the partner’s appreciation for the FSS program and the participants’ dedication to achieving self-sufficiency objectives. Janine’s account of a typical interaction with a partner who shares the appreciation for participants’ efforts to overcome barriers illustrates this perspective.

"Oh! You're on the FSS program with Janine! That's a good program. Let's see how we can help you." There's a little different attitude. Respect. They develop a respect for the clients; they really do. Now they see that this isn't going to be a family that's going to be on welfare for generations. That's a family that's breaking the cycle and getting the job training, the education, and getting the job and getting off the system, getting off of housing, going into homeownership. They have respect for someone who is working to get off of assistance.

The following excerpts from interviews indicate that much of the value gained from personal connections is in knowing to whom not to steer participants. As Marshall conveyed,

But I only try to send people to orgs where I think they'll get an ear. Because I'm getting tired of sending people to places where they're getting moved from one place to another. (1186-1188)

In discussing her hopes to develop better relations with DTA providers, Kathleen stressed, “I would like to think that for every one of our customer service people that's not committed to helping, there may be someone who is, who has a different attitude... I try to avoid the grumpy person.” (1037-1059)

**Streamlining the Bureaucracy:** Practitioners also conveyed how they employ the knowledge they gain from their personal connections to streamline the application process and enable participants to gain faster access to the services to which they are entitled. Practitioners reported that when they have verified specific regulations and practices not commonly shared with the clientele, it is easier to direct participants to the appropriate staff person and prepare
them to bring all of the necessary documentation and thus prevent repeated trips and frustration. As Tina explicates:

I may get the name of the person on the phone who says, "Sure send the person over with this; they need x, y, and z. So I can say to the client "You're not going to show up there and babble on about this and that..." (Instead,) they can say, "I'm working with Tina Lack." I'm going to give you (the client) everything, so when you go over there, you have the letter from Housing. You have a contact name so you feel more comfortable going there; it's okay to go there. You're going to be eligible. You're only going to make one trip. Bring it there. Don't get there and find out that you need a copy of the pay stubs and you didn't know that when you showed up so that now you're frustrated and now you're yelling at someone. (P3: 11-18)

The previous examples of Luz learning about the multi-agency process for applying for admission to a training program and Joanne’s developing the template to help clients with outstanding student loans apply for financial aid also evidence the benefits of personal connections for streamlining bureaucratic processes.

Personal connections sometimes do more than prepare the client to more effectively navigate the bureaucratic morass. For example, Sherry recorded the legal services organization serving her area in the shaded, value-added box because her contacts sometimes allow her clients to bypass their official intake process (P4: 397-399). Where an individual contact person has more than one role – as is often the case when partner organizations contract to administer multiple government programs – knowing whom to direct clients and what to ask them can also prevent the participant from the necessity of several separate requests. Sherry indicated that her contact with a worker at the New England Farm Workers Council was a value-adding contact because knowing that she has these multiple roles allows her clients to seek approval for a wider variety of utility subsidies in a single visit.

In another example, Deidre’s contacts in the fuel assistance department within her agency (one of the two CAP agencies in the study) allow her to process FSS participants’ requests more expediently, an important advantage given that the scarce subsidies are dispensed on first-come, first-served basis. Although, this co-worker cannot guarantee that FSS clients will receive the assistance, she is able to accept their applications without having them wait on the often clogged telephone lines because she knows that Deidre has assured that they contain the requisite income verifying documents.
Summary and Assessment of Techniques of Adjusting Expectations: These four types of interaction with colleagues in other agencies improve the services FSS clients obtain in subtle ways. They do not expand available resources and involve only small changes to routine procedures, changes that primarily influence what the FSS practitioners and their clients do as opposed to modifications on the part of the partners. Rather than material gains, the FSS practitioners expand their knowledge for making appropriate referrals to within the existing service delivery system. The knowledge they acquire about partners’ regulations and procedures helps them improve their clients’ chances of accessing available resources for which they are eligible and reduce the aggravations that are typical of over-taxed bureaucracies. The FSS practitioners’ also gain relational knowledge to direct their clients to colleagues who are more likely to be responsive to their clients.

Each of these examples shows how the FSS practitioners adapt their behavior in response to their heightened awareness of what is feasible to expect from the existing service system. The scarcity of program resources, together with partners’ limited discretion to alter restrictive regulations, constrains the potential for value-adding cooperation despite similar clientele and compatible goals. As only the FSS practitioners benefit from the interactions, the relationships involve what Scharpf (1978) terms *unilateral* as opposed to *mutual* exchanges and in Alter and Hage’s (1993) taxonomy, they exemplify *administrative* rather than *operational task management* methods of coordination.

While gains from these interactions are subtle – particularly when they entail lowering expectations of what is feasible for clients to obtain – the practitioners emphasize that they are nevertheless valuable. Consistent with the definition of creative street-level practice, they speak of them as additions to their ongoing practice as opposed to situational adjustments to favored clients. The techniques contrast with the each of the coping mechanisms identified in Chapter 1. The FSS practitioners employ the knowledge gained from their colleagues to expand access to resources rather than to further ration them. Instead of focusing only on what they already know, they seek out new information. Rather than blaming clients for failing to follow directions, they guide them to more effective means of getting what they need, even if needs are not fully satisfied.

In some respects, these examples also illustrate how the informal network of service providers augments the FSS practitioners’ capacity to be responsive to the regulations governing
the existing systems so that they can discern appropriate ways of assisting their clients. This learning opportunity is particularly salient in times when policies undergo frequent changes and budget cut-backs alter the landscape of available resources. Some of the examples also evidence how – as in the closer knit and more committed support of the practitioner discussion forums – the knowledge gained from these relationships among members of the broader community of service providers reinforces the FSS practitioners’ sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy. Although certainly not enough to meet all the program expectations, these adjustments were enough for the practitioners to designate them as adding-value to their practice.

**Category II: Expanding Accountability to Raise Expectations of Partners**

The practitioners employ the coordination techniques in this second category to add value to routine referrals through persuading their partners to modify the ways they deliver their services to FSS clients. The practitioners’ narratives present how these efforts aim to reverse the tendency of fellow service providers to employ coping mechanisms that make existing resources inaccessible to eligible clients. They raise expectations for their partners’ performance by holding them accountable to the programs’ intended aims and to the norms of acceptable practice and by improving their capacity to understand the needs of the referred clients. Once partners come to recognize that they are working towards similar objectives, they are more likely to coordinate with the FSS practitioners to ensure accountability of their clientele to the demands of each of the programs. The practitioners’ reflections in the engagement identified four such techniques: improved communication, enhanced accountability of partners to clients and of clients to programs, and case-sharing among FSS practitioners and partners.

**Improved Communication:** One way FSS practitioners strive to improve service delivery is by resolving communication barriers between their partners and the clients they have in common. For example, Deidre explained how she helped a participant whose welfare benefits had recently expired by guiding the client and partner towards mutual understanding of how TANF eligibility rules apply to her specific case. Deidre’s reflection shows how she served as a mediator between the welfare worker and their client.

A lot of people aren't aware what benefits they have left, and what they can still participate in, and (that) they can get training still... And a lot of people just have so much trouble talking with their case workers. They don't like them, they're not helpful, you know.... I think it helps the client when I might be able to find out more, get more of a direct answer.
Language barriers are also common practice problems that personal connections help to ameliorate. Iciar's fluency in Spanish allows her to resolve misunderstandings between Spanish speaking participants in her programs and service providers in other agencies. Others noted that their contacts with speakers of less common languages in other agencies allow them to broker translation services for their immigrant clients to facilitate their interactions throughout the service system.

The practitioners also stressed that regular communication with partners improves their capacity to devise effective service plans and make good referrals when by creating a system for receiving more timely updates about service changes or upcoming workshops and events. The practitioners also explained that ongoing communication is also vital to receiving advanced notice about application deadlines, a crucial factor especially when scarce resources give advantage to early applicants. In some cases, the practitioners reported that they had institutionalized communication systems through inclusion in e-mail lists and making a routine of faxing monthly calendars and announcements.

Enhancing Partners' Accountability: Practitioners recorded some connections as adding value because they assure that partners fulfill obligations to clients as prescribed in the program guidelines and generalized values of quality service. Ruth tells us how she appeals to the norms of the community of practice of service providers to insist that partners attend to her clients' needs.

Some people in those human service agencies do a better job than others. Some people are not very good at human connections, and they might treat people a little better if they know I sent them their way, because if they don't treat them well, it might get back to me and I might have a talk with them afterwards.

Partners also raise expectations of their service providing partners by holding them accountable to broadly acknowledged societal norms and values, even if self-sufficiency is not among their primary objectives. Appealing to the prominent societal values of striving to achieve economic independence from social supports or is another technique FSS practitioners employ to engage partners in better serving their clients. As Tina explains:

And if someone is on the fence of "Why should I help this person?" Or "We've been around with this person in the past..." And it's a really great opportunity to say, "They do this really wonderful program, FSS. Maybe you haven't heard of it... And they're really working towards goals that lead to economic self-sufficiency." And I think that once someone gets that understanding, then when the person calls back,
their attitude is a little different. This isn't someone who is going around looking for the free ride everywhere. This is someone who is linked, with a purpose, with a goal.

Such persuasion tactics are particularly salient where the partner’s self-sufficiency approach conflicts with the longer-term, career building objectives of FSS. Indeed, most of these examples involve welfare agencies where efforts to reduce the rolls with work-first strategies often conflict with FSS career building strategies. Other frequently mentioned examples include training programs where the FSS practitioner helped mediate between the participants’ training goals and the provider’s recommended direction. To illustrate, Janine persuaded a welfare case-worker to change her perception of the fit between her agency’s regulations and the participants’ FSS career plan:

Kathy called me years ago and she said, “Why won't you let this girl take this job in the medical field, in a medical office as a receptionist?” I said, “Well, number one, she's in the FSS program and she just completed her education in this field,” whatever it was. And she says, “So. Why can't she take this job?” (I responded,) “She just spent all this time going to school in this field and you’re telling her that she has to take this job because it's going to fill that requirement? You know, let's work with her and let's try to find her a job in her field.” So she did. But it was like (the welfare case-worker was saying), "I'm trying to get these people off the rolls." But then they get a different view of the person: "My God, you just spent 2,3, 4 years going to school to develop this career!"

The narratives also suggest that the combination of personal ties and acknowledged longer-term goal alignment sometimes leads partners to adapt operating procedures and even to institutionalize the practice improvement. For example, when an FSS participant was denied a childcare subsidy because the college she was attending was not on the approved list of affiliates, the FSS practitioner asked a colleague who had attended high school with the agency’s director to intervene and the college was added to the list. When personal connections are with people of higher levels of authority, they may have even greater impact. For example, Sherry knows the director of an emergency assistance provider through her involvement on the aforementioned DTA Advisory Board. In response to my question about how her connection adds value, she responded:

[I]t would be accountability, I think. Because if the staff that is below the person that I know is rude to them in any way or they're mistreated and if they tell me that, then I can speak with (the director) and let her know that this is what's happening here.
**Enhancing Clients' Accountability:** Where partners are already dedicated to caring for clients rather than coping with overly taxing program demands, the practitioners told about joining forces to monitor clients’ accountability to both programs’ requirements. For example, Sherry explained that her former colleagues at the local community college informed her if any of her FSS participants were missing classes. Sherry then followed up with the participant and seek a solution to any obstacles that were frustrating their regular attendance. Both Sherry and her former colleagues at the college benefited from their relationship and their shared commitment to participants’ progress in the GED and ESL classes.

This practice of ensuring accountability to program goals and standards of performance appears to be a collective enterprise, with FSS practitioners, clients, and service partners all striving towards the same goals. This excerpt from Tina’s explication of her creative coordination efforts illustrates the potential for such concerted effort:

> If someone came to me and really professed that they made this effort, I'm going to call the person at the adult learning center and find out if everyday, you were in class. You didn't miss a class; you were there. Every time you're supposed to hand something in, you handed it in. If I ask the guy if you asked for help because you weren't getting something, I know you did your part. If all of those things happened, and you still ended up leaving this (program) without your piece of paper, then I've got a question for that agency about how that happened. (991:996)

This example of spanning organizational and role boundaries aims to engage all participants in the self-sufficiency agenda in striving to meet the paradigm’s high expectations. The narratives also evidenced that maintaining that sense of shared commitment sometimes requires the FSS practitioners to weigh their longer term relations with their partners against the opportunity to assist a particular client. For example, Ruth elected not to refer a participant with a hyperactive son to the summer camp program directed by a personal contact she met through the Community Leadership Institute so as not to diminish his trust in her judgment and jeopardize future referrals to benefit additional clients.

**Case Sharing:** The narratives also illustrate that when partners recognize the shared objectives and common target population of their programs, they can work together to make the most of their different roles and united commitment to support the participants’ self-sufficiency efforts. Some examples of this technique suggest that working together with common clients improves understanding and relationships between clients and both practitioners. For example, Tina often meets with her counterpart at the Career Center to develop service plans for their
common participants. Among the advantages she cites is the possibility that the chemistry between the client and colleague is sometimes better with one of them than the other in the initial stages of interaction. In other cases, Tina explained that case sharing leads to more open and honest communication between the client and the FSS practitioner:

We should all be on the same page. And it's very difficult to help someone when they're telling the DTA case person they're not working and they're telling me, they are working. And they're accruing escrow and they're telling the utility program that they don't have any money when I know that they're making $20,000 a year and they're putting $450 in escrow.

Communication among practitioners working with the same clients also helps the practitioners to encourage the clients to continue trying when efforts to succeed are frustrated as Joanne and Janine’s conversation about their connection with a GED instructor illustrates:

JOANNE: It's really difficult for these people who put their egos out on the line to pass these tests and if they don't, it's absolutely crushing. When that happens, Alice (the instructor) gives me a call and she says, "Look it. This person didn't pass the test. But I called her and let her know that she missed it by one point and she should come right back and take it again."

JANINE: She didn't have to call you though. She's that type who will go above and beyond. (465:477)

Joanne emphasized that such conversations allow her to follow up with the client to reinforce her colleague’s encouragement.

Other examples of case sharing suggest that practitioners in each agency can work towards a realistic and unified plan of action to support a client’s pursuit of work goals as this quote about Tina’s work with a structured work trainer implies:

I need to know what service you (the partner) are providing, what the plan is what you see lacking in terms of skills and training. And possibly sometimes we need to be on the same page with someone. If we're doing an ITSP (individual training and service plan), and (the client’s) goals are not realistic and really achievable I need to try to get that person on the other end to be saying that as I'm saying it: "You may want an office job, but that's not really realistic given your skills, given the barriers, given the things that you're dealing with."

Other accounts of this technique suggest that where partners are on the same page about self-sufficiency strategies, their concerted efforts allow them to take advantage of program
synergies to improve participants' chances for success in each. Tina is a spokesperson for this idea as well:

Because (we're all) involved, we are doing more than just offering someone FSS. We are going to be in there along with others. The Board of Health wants to get them back in; DSS doesn't want to take the kids away; fuel assistance wants to be able to help them where they are in place and we've all worked really hard to get you in this unit; now we want to keep you there. And as many of us that can drive that message home, clear up the barriers, give the person some strength and empowerment in terms of making up their mind about what they're doing or in making a hard decision. "So okay, we're going to be behind you. We're going to support this.

Yet other practitioners are more cautious about integrating service plans. Sherry works with her case management counterparts to avoid the problem of clients being pulled in too many different directions. She prefers to develop the career strategy with the FSS participant without the intervention of other service providers, especially when they do not share the same perspective on how self-sufficiency is achieved.

I don't want people that have all these other (case management strategies) because we have, I believe, the best program because of the escrow account and, you know, we know how to strategize to get them there because we've got the whole picture in mind. One thing leads to another with this program. They're all about quick fixes. The quick fixes don't work with this. ...

(And you need to be) taking that person's desires in front of the need at the moment, like really hear what they want. Like when we do an assessment with them, "What is it that would make your heart happy? Not just to pay the bills. What is it that you feel that you would do just to pay the bills and what is it that you have always wanted to do? If you were a young girl or a young guy and you said, 'You know what? I always wanted to be this when I grew up?' What was that?" ...

I just want the people to be able to be out there to provide the services that this person has outlined as what they want to do. I (don't) want them to change what this person said they want to do. That's not my job to do that, that's not your job to do that. They know what they want to do in their life. We're here to provide the avenue for them to get there. That's just how I feel. (P4: 1832-73).

Summary and Assessment of Techniques for Raising Expectations of Partners and Clients:

These examples of persuading partners to modify their behavior aim to improve participants' access to resources already available in the service delivery system. In contrast to the first category of creative coordination techniques where the FSS practitioners steer clients to their most caring contacts, these second category techniques aim to elicit from their partners more dedicated attention to clients' needs. The practitioners do so by helping partners
understand their clients better and by calling attention to shared goals of promoting self-
sufficiency, however defined. To enact these strategies of creative street-level coordination, the
practitioners also rely on the relationships of trust and loyalty among these members of the
broader community of practice of service providers and they build upon their commitment to
shared – if rarely articulated – service values. Contractual bonds with clients and the
relationships forged with them in the course of the program are also vital for making these
practices work.

To employ the techniques described in these examples, the practitioners acknowledge and
reinforce the inter-connectedness of the programs in the social delivery system. Like the
techniques of the previous category, these involve administrative coordination; they make use of
existing rules and standard operating procedures. However, unlike the partners identified in the
previous category, these partners have more discretion to interpret how to apply these routines to
respond more appropriately to clients’ specific circumstances. The FSS practitioners and their
partners thus work together to discern what is appropriate and so embody Vinzant and Crothers’
characterization of street-level accountability discussed in Chapter 1. Where FSS practitioners
and their partners share similar commitment to this endeavor, their relationship involves
reciprocal dependency; they help one another “do the right thing.”

These examples contrast with previous studies of street-level coordination discussed in
Chapter 2 that found that goals are incompatible and partners are incompetent curtailed efforts to
work together. However, whether the practitioners’ interactions with their colleagues constitute
improvements to ongoing practice in addition to situational adjustments for specific clients is
less apparent. The practitioners’ accounts of their experiences employing these techniques imply
that they are part of a repertoire of oft-repeated modes of interacting with these and similar
partners. Rachelle’s contact with the director of the welfare agency led to a change in operations
that impacts all future clients. Yet most of these interpersonal connections do not modify
established procedures throughout partners’ agencies. Consequently, the capacity to use the
techniques may not survive staff turnover. Nor do changes in one colleague’s attitudes about
clients necessarily lead their co-workers in those agencies to alter their views. Moreover, many
of the practitioners’ stories convey that they are not always able to achieve the sense of shared
purpose with their counterparts in other agencies, as Sherry’s concerns about case-sharing
convey.
The practice of discerning what is appropriate with partners in other agencies also complicates the task of balancing multiple accountabilities and responsibilities discussed in Chapter 1. Ruth's need to weigh the needs of the client with the hyperactive child and her relationship with the summer camp director exemplify the challenges of being a partner-agent as well as a state-agent and client-agent.

Despite these limitations, the practitioners' narratives convey they believe their efforts improve partners' understanding of their clients and hold them accountable to program objectives and standards of care. The use of the techniques in this second category of creative street-level coordination does not resolve the strains of scarce resources, high case loads, and ambiguous service technologies that result in the tendency to cope rather than care. However, according to the practitioners' assessments, they do make the high expectations of the self-sufficiency paradigm somewhat more feasible to achieve.

Category III: Redistributing Resources and Coordinating Program Practices to Make Meeting Expectations More Feasible

The three coordination techniques included in the third category redistribute resources already available within the service delivery system so that more are available to FSS clients. Some entail importing and integrating partners' expertise into the FSS operations. Others extend preferential status for receipt of program resources to FSS participants through joint eligibility determination or by changing the way the existing eligibility rules are applied. The third technique in this category is that of securing additional funding and in-kind contributions.

*Integrating Expertise*: Importing partners' expertise is one of the most frequently mentioned techniques of adding value included in this category. Partners respond to the FSS practitioners' invitations to conduct workshops for FSS participants on resume writing, budgeting and financial planning, credit repair and debt consolidation, accessing the Earned Income Tax Credit, and healthy parenting. These workshops augment the standard one-on-one case management required by the FSS regulations and they address issues that tend to be overlooked by partners within the referral network, especially the topics related to debt and financial literacy. In some cases, FSS practitioners work with their partners to devise curriculum that targets the specific needs of their participants, as in the financial literacy program Sherry developed with her colleagues at the National Consumer Credit Counseling Association and the ongoing Economic Literacy program co-produced by FSS staff at HAC and banks on the Cape.
Many of these workshops become part of standard offerings for FSS practitioners; the partners offer them on a regular basis to reach new participants and respond to clients' interests in learning more about specific topics. The benefit of increased exposure to potential clients for their own ongoing programs is often the incentive for partners. Some offer preliminary screening for their programs, with aim of increasing the chances that the participant will follow through as a result of the face-to-face contact. Materials provided sometimes constitute raw materials for FSS practitioners to devise their own workshops so that they are less dependent on the partners' availability and continued interest in offering their resources.

**Preferential Status to FSS Participants:** In some cases, practitioners' connections with other providers afford FSS participants access to benefits or services for which they would not otherwise be eligible. For example, Tina periodically meets with an informal committee of colleagues from Berkshire Works (the Career Center), the local welfare office, and the staff of Access to Jobs to make joint decisions about how to allocate scarce resources such as car repair loans, child care or youth programs, scholarships to training programs, and other benefits available on an ad hoc basis. She is also a member of a similar committee for a community foundation that awards small grants to families. In both cases, Tina’s reports about her clients' efforts to achieve self-sufficiency goals often lead to a decision to favor the FSS participant over someone with otherwise similar qualifications. Other FSS practitioners argue that their clients are particularly good investments because their pursuit of their five-year plan for career development means that they are likely to free up these resources to help other clients in the future.

Assistance in identifying eligible and especially “deserving” beneficiaries, the promise of client accountability, and trusting personal relations are the resources that make this type of creative coordination work. For example, the Department of Employment and Training director who introduced Ruth to the Career Center services expressed interest in future collaborations. When I asked Ruth why she thought he was interested she replied:

Well, knowing that people that are going through his program actually have some support behind them, and they're not just on their own. They have somebody that--because they're signed up for classes and having a case manager that might remind them to not be late, and to keep going, and to not give up, sort of like a cheerleader position. I would think that would be one way.

Similarly, MBHP’s FSS practitioners make use of their longstanding relationship with Family to Family to access resources that would otherwise be unavailable to even the most competitive
participants. The nonprofit serves as a conduit for several small grants to low-income individuals and families. Family to Family has no clients of their own and so MBHP, with its relatively large number of FSS participants, offers them a resource of income eligible and highly motivated grant applicants.

Personal connections, recognition of common target populations, and commitment to helping clients overcome the hurdles that lower their chances of success also lead some partners to alter program guidelines so as to give FSS clients priority over others. Sherry’s connection with a local CDC grants her FSS participants priority for the matched savings for home purchase program the CDC operates. Not only does the FSS escrow account help her participants secure down payments, the added case management support makes them particularly good candidates for following through with the programs incremental steps towards home purchase readiness. However, Sherry’s FSS participants who live outside of the CDC’s primary service area are not eligible to participate in the program, notwithstanding their other advantages. In an additional example, Janine’s personal connections with the director of one of the local community colleges secured her FSS participants a waiver from the $50 application fees when they identify themselves to the registrar. The director has since retired and it is not yet clear whether the six year commitment will continue under his replacement.

Some of these creative practices survive partner turnover. Tina’s personal connections at the Child Care Resource Center in the Berkshires mean that she is often able to secure child care vouchers for participants who are on the brink of securing a job, yet need child care in order to attend interviews or work the necessary weeks before receiving the official pay stub required for release of the voucher. Tina forged this connection as a result of the collective efforts of her fellow FSS coordinators to access designated child care vouchers for FSS participants statewide, a story that I tell in greater detail in the following section. Whereas the designated vouchers have long since expired, Tina’s personal connections fostered an understanding at the local office that yielded this arrangement of putting legitimated local discretion to work to the benefit of clients’ longer term interests. Moreover, virtually all of the child care agency’s staff engages in this creative practice, including those who were not in those positions at the time of the statewide agreement.

**Resources for FSS Programs:** In addition to the redistribution of existing resources that privilege individual FSS participants over other consumers, personal connections also help FSS
practitioners access resources for running their programs. Several of the practitioners rely on the financial and in-kind contributions they receive regularly from community service providers, banks, and local businesses to support their graduation dinners and other events organized for FSS participants. Ruth is able to send out her FSS newsletter and organize graduation dinners because of the help from volunteers she recruits through personal connections. Janine’s connections at the local community college enable her to use the facilities to host her Program Coordinating Meetings and graduation ceremonies for FSS participants without having to pay the usual fees and Iciar regularly makes use of the offices of a multi-service agency in a remote area of her jurisdiction to meet with clients who are unable to travel the long distance to her own agency.

Summary and Assessment of Techniques for Aligning Partners Expectations with FSS Goals:
The coordination techniques included in this category clearly fit the definition of creative street-level practice; they involve departures from routine referrals that add value to FSS participants and ongoing program operations. They are all the result of both FSS practitioners’ and their partners’ recognition of complementary goals and their willingness to apply their expertise, skills, and resources to furthering those objectives. In most, the promise of attracting eligible clients who are especially likely to succeed is the motivating factor appealing to the partners. In others, the gain is simply the partners’ sense of contributing to a worthy cause or meeting a funders’ expectations. As one practitioner explained a partner’s motivation to coordinate:

JOANNE: It must be a part of what the organization has said that they would do, maybe to get grant money or something, that they were going to do community outreach. So I think we’re their "community outreach." (P1: 1450-62).

Regardless of the nature of the perceived gains, coordination relies on the partners’ sense that they are at least somewhat dependent on one another to attain these outcomes. This contingency on specific outcomes was less apparent in the previously discussed techniques of fostering accountability and case sharing. Also unlike the other value-adding connections of the previously described categories, many of these coordinating connections involve more than one partnering organization, as in the case of Tina’s allocation committees. Several also entail commitments made at the organizational level as opposed to only among the front-line practitioners themselves.
Although the examples referenced above suggest that their clientele and the work they do to support them are resources that they can exchange with partners, the lack of resources FSS practitioners bring to the exchange agreement also hinders their ability to utilize these techniques. To illustrate, Iciar’s use of her partner’s offices proved precarious because she was unable to offer case management services to the partner’s other clients who were not eligible for her FSS program since they did not hold a housing voucher from CTI and because long waitlists for housing subsidies made creating such interdependence impracticable. When the partner lost several steady grants following a major reorganization, they began demanding payment in return for the use of their premises. As Iciar recounted:

And I tried to explain. This isn't a personal issue. ... I don't have a budget. ... I don't even have a little money available. So it's like – it's out of the question. So I didn't like that at all. But I know that it's not personal and stuff. So I don't blame them. ... I still have the connection. Once in a while I still try to get together with clients there. But I know that I'm getting more and more clients in Salem and I'm not using their offices because of that. ... But I still get phone calls from one of (their staff): "I have this participant and .. I think she'd be perfect for FSS .." And I do my thing. I send them information and we have a phone call. But the second step is to get them into the program and that doesn't always happen.

Similarly, Sherry’s efforts to sustain a service consortium with service providers in the spirit of those enjoyed by the FSS program in the Berkshires disintegrated when one key member of the partnership continually reneged on his commitments to attend meetings and assemble the brochures. The lack of a mandate to require coordination or resources to entice partners to follow-through with commitments is clearly a barrier to further creative street-level practice.

Disparities between geographical jurisdictions of programs are another obstacle to making broader use of these third category creative coordination practices. Program goals may be aligned, but if clients are not eligible because of their residence, the resources cannot be directed towards FSS participants, regardless of the advantages in other respects.

Another limitation is the practitioners’ own sense that awarding priority status to their own participants is a violation of service provision norms. Kathleen elaborated on why she thinks such arrangements are unfair:

I guess it’s because I'm so entrenched in the whole Section 8 voucher waiting list concept and how it historically has never been appropriate for people to jump up on the list because of different things. Of course, special programs like JobLink have surfaced a target population, and there's a couple of other things that have come around to help people out, so they don't have to wait all that time. But there's still
that concept of people have to be treated in order and wait their turn. And the idea of giving someone preferential treatment doesn't always sit well with providers or with clients.

Kathleen's concern surfaces the conflict in ideas about fairness in the Section 8 scheme of redistributive justice based on principles of financial need determination and first-come-first served as opposed to the merit-based principles of FSS. In general, however, this broader community of practice endorses these coordination practices. The self-sufficiency mandate endorses "creaming" for clients seen to be more motivated to make a difference in their lives and the resources exchanged—whether material, in-kind, or in spirit—serve to validate the redistribution practices, even if it means that others are receiving less.

Category IV: Raising Expectations of Programs and Policies through Collaboration and Policy Advocacy

The techniques of creative street-level coordination included in the fourth category are the result of novel ways FSS and their partners in other organizations work together to bring new resources into the social service delivery system itself. These examples evidence how working together with partners who operate in different domains allows frontline practitioners to address problems that lack clear ownership in the service community or are not adequately recognized by those with the authority to do something about them.

As in the previous categories, the following descriptions derive from the FSS practitioners' explanations for their additions to the added-value box of the diagrams. I also supplement these examples with what I learned in both the nonprofit and public housing practitioners' discussion forums and from my interviews with current and previous FSS practitioners. I begin with the collaboration and advocacy efforts initiated exclusively by the FSS practitioners and then briefly contrast these examples with efforts that involve additional initiators within the housing agencies and with other members of the FSS practitioners' community of practice.

Street-Level Collaborative Initiatives: The value-added box of the diagrams included several new programs the FSS practitioners developed with other organizations and members of their communities. For example, the FSS participants in HAC's program benefit from a mentoring program in which community volunteers provide assistance in budgeting, long-range financial planning, and other encouragement on a one-on-one basis. The program was devised
by one of HAC’s first FSS practitioners who adopted HAC’s tradition of involving volunteers to create this new approach of providing more intensive individualized assistance to clients than she was able to provide on her own. The program continues to operate even after the originating FSS practitioner was no longer working in the organization.

Sherry’s Career Closet emerged as a result of a conversation with a representative from the Association of Women Business Owners at a breakfast forum held for nonprofit groups in western Massachusetts. Sherry mentioned that FSS participants often lack the appropriate clothing for interviews and pre-paycheck work in administrative fields. By the end of the morning, the idea for a business clothes donation program to be housed at Sherry’s organization and sponsored by the Association was born. Despite the appreciation Sherry received from the participants, her new partners who had been seeking some way of contributing to low-income women in the community, and her colleagues and supervisors, an agency reorganization created space constraints that ultimately displaced the Career Closet. This dependency on internal agency priorities for the success of external partnerships was echoed in Sherry’s fundraising attempts; two grant opportunities she identified for FSS programming were diverted to agency-wide needs.

Tina’s work with local banks illustrates an alternative scenario where agency support was the spark for the collaboration. Her executive director put her in contact with bank representatives who were interested in cultivating their low-income clientele, presumably for the combined benefits of meeting Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) obligations and for establishing relationships with new potentially long-term consumers in the area. Tina agreed to conduct a survey of her clients’ banking needs and in exchange, bank staff conducted a series of workshops on money management and other financial literacy topics. The bank also initiated passbook savings accounts especially tailored for low-income customers. FSS participants received five free money orders a month to be used for regular rent and bill payments. The deal was particularly attractive for participants who were, in Tina’s words, “falling through the cracks in mismanaging money.” Paying with a money order gave them a receipt to prove that they had paid their bills and helped to monitor their spending. Although the income cap of $6,000 a year meant that many FSS clients who were already working were not eligible, the collaboration allowed Tina to broker more positive relationships between the banks and her clients with poor banking histories with the banks.
Another of Sherry’s initiatives illustrates how collaborative ventures sometimes begin with promise yet ultimately dissolve due to the practitioners’ insufficient leverage to assure that their partners follow through with commitments. After Sherry had invited local colleagues at the National Consumer Law Center to provide a workshop at her agency, the Center’s staff invited her to be a co-applicant for a grant to develop a more extensive series of workshops on money management and consumer rights to be followed by ongoing counseling for workshop participants. Although the pilot workshops were considered successful, the follow-up counseling never transpired. Reflecting on this experience, Sherry surmised that she was unable to hold her colleagues to their commitments since the funds were released before the counseling phase of the program and because she had already fulfilled her portion of the preparations, she the partners were not beholden to her for additional contributions.

The revolving loan fund Janine established with her clients and the support of local residents and businesses illustrates how collaborative efforts can help enhance the synergy among program goals and how they evolve with the program’s maturation. Early in the program history, several of Janine’s participants found they were unable to follow through with their self-sufficiency plans because of lack of funds to purchase uniforms, emergency car repairs, or other work and education related expenses. Since they had not yet increased their earned income, Janine could not authorize early disbursements from their escrow accounts. Because FSS has no discretionary budget, Janine utilized the resources she did have: the participants themselves, local business people’s interest in advertising their services, and community members’ eagerness to support participants who are striving to become financially self-sufficient. Janine and the participants identified a host of ways to raise money including car washes, bake sales, yard sales, raffles, and luncheon benefits at the local pizza place. The participants helped Janine contact local business people and community residents to contribute items to sell, space to hold the events, refreshments, and other in-kind contributions. They also supplied the majority of the labor for the events themselves. Any participant who had participated in a fundraising event could access the money raised — in the hundreds of dollars — to support goal related expenses.

Reflecting on her experiences, Janine conveyed that she discovered that additional benefits emerged in the course of its development and operation. The fundraising projects turned into family events where children saw parents striving taking action to help themselves and where participants could share tips about managing the challenges of a new work life with family
responsibilities. Janine also felt that participants learned valuable planning skills and the empowering sense of accomplishment. Her outreach to the local press won exposure for her business connections and made it easier to elicit contributions for future events. The press coverage also exposed the community to the FSS program and granted participants the recognition of their efforts to make a difference in their lives. Moreover, colleagues throughout the agency came to understand and appreciate the FSS program and were more eager to offer the administrative support necessary for other aspects of FSS operation.

Eventually, Janine and the participants realized that repeatedly replenishing the funds required more effort than was feasible on an ongoing basis. They then transformed the program into a revolving loan fund where FSS participants who had joined in the fundraising events would be eligible for no-interest loans for up to $150 to be repaid over six months. A committee comprised of Janine, her supervisor, and three FSS participants devised the guidelines for loan approval. Initially, this committee authorized all requests, a practice that was eventually transferred to Janine and her supervisor to expedite the release of funds for true emergencies. Although this shift was less appealing to the participants than the previous grant system, Janine saw the requirement to repay the loans as a means to foster accountability and cultivate budgeting skills.

While still in existence at the time of this writing, the loan fund is used less frequently than in the past, in part because more of the participants are able to withdraw goal related expenses from their escrow accounts (and because of the availability of larger emergency loans from the Fleet FSS Loan Program described below). These adaptations and the evolution of the revolving loan program itself illustrate the fluidity of street-level creative practice and its responsiveness to emerging problems of practice as well as opportunities to address multiple objectives.

**Street-Level Policy and Budget Advocacy:** Advocating for changes to regulations and budgets that govern the service delivery system is another approach street-level practitioners sometimes employ to expand the resources available to their clients. In these change efforts, the practitioners aim to call attention to the inadequacies within the existing social service delivery system by joining their voices with those of like-minded partners, particularly those who have more influential standing. Partners in this category include public transit providers with decision-making authority over routes or subsidy programs, a Workforce Investment Board, a few multi-service agencies, other housing authorities, legal services agencies, state legislators, and a
number of local and statewide advocacy organizations. They also included DHCD, PCCs, and their own practitioner discussion forum.

The story of the Southbridge Transportation Coalition illustrates both the potential for street-level influence in the state legislature, the limitations of that potential, and the value of collaboration with other interested stakeholders. Rachelle, one of the early FSS coordinators at RHI responded to the lack of regular bus service in the southeastern corner of Worcester County by bringing together other service providers in the area to discuss possible solutions. Rachelle and the coalition had attempted to work with regional transit authorities to design new bus routes and service times that meet their clients' transportation needs. However, the coalition’s efforts did not yield the successful coordination that proved effective for Rachelle’s counterparts in other parts of the state. Consequently, the coalition decided to pressure the state government to finance extended bus service. After numerous letters and meetings, regional representatives secured discretionary funds for morning and evening bus service to the area.

This commitment expired after the first fiscal year and, despite the high ridership rates, the coalition was unable to convince legislators to refund it. Rachelle led the search for alternative funding sources. On a tip from a national public transit organization, she contacted a Native American tribal organization that operates a bus service not far from Southbridge. A partnership with the coalition quickly formed and the tribal organization took over the route. The acknowledged interdependencies of the tribe’s quest for profits and the combined service needs of the FSS program and clients of other local service organizations resulted in a more stable funding stream than that promised by legislative representatives.

Other FSS practitioners have developed personal contacts with state legislators with the hopes of gaining recognition -- and ultimately additional resources -- for FSS. As a result of Janine’s connections, FSS graduates receive official citations of merit from both the state house and senate delivered, usually in person, by the legislators at each annual FSS Graduation and Recognition Dinner. Sherry established a number of contacts with government elected and administrative officials and policy advocates through her attendance at events of the Nonprofit Human Service Organization Forum, Women’s Educational Industrial Union, and the Massachusetts Workforce Alliance. Although her aim was to lobby for more resources for the FSS program and the services FSS clients require, she was unable to orchestrate an advocacy campaign on her own. Nor did her suggestions in the practitioner discussion forums to follow-up
on these leads generate a more concerted plan of action on the part of the group. Plans to invite the officials and advocates to the practitioner discussion meetings fell through due to scheduling conflicts and were quickly forgotten.

Agency and Practitioner Forum Initiated Efforts to Collaborate and Advocate:

The shaded box of value-added connections also included partners in collaborative ventures and advocacy campaigns that the FSS practitioners did not initiate on their own. Two of these were initiated by those in senior management positions within the nonprofit housing agencies while others were the product of the collective efforts of members of the FSS practitioner discussion forums.

Agency Initiated Collaboration: In the two initiatives where managers and directors of the housing agencies’ played a more active role in designing and implementing the joint ventures, the gains for the FSS program proved to be greater than those the FSS practitioners could achieve on their own.

HAC’s “Saving for Assets” program helps the agency’s FSS participants, other HAC tenants, and income eligible Cape residents to develop the financial management skills and savings practices to become homeowners, one of the most common objectives of the FSS program. Funded by Barnstable County and the federal Assets for Independence Act in conjunction with two local banks, the program matches participants’ savings to yield more substantial assets than their earned income – and FSS escrow funds -- alone can support. The program also leverages assistance from the regional branch of Consumer Credit Counseling Services, technical assistance from the Massachusetts Individual Development Account Solution (MIDAS) Collaborative, and volunteer support from the AmeriCorps VISTA program to expand on the efforts of HAC’s FSS mentors and economic literacy workshops.

SMOC’s involvement in the Metro Southwest Regional Employment Board Health Sector Initiative makes its FSS program the only one of the eight (and the only one of all the programs represented in either practitioner discussion forum) to work with employers to create new jobs and training programs to advance FSS clients along career ladders. SMOC joined the Southern Middlesex county Regional Employment Board (REB), another community-based organization with experience in job training, and area hospitals to submit a Request for Proposals for sector-specific workforce development proposals. The partners were awarded funding (nearly $700,000) to offer a unique opportunity for low-income people to augment their basic
educational skills and training in occupations in demand in the region’s hospitals. The combined in-class and on-the-job training aims to build career ladders for low-skilled workers while filling the hospitals’ difficulties in attracting and retaining workers at all skill levels. FSS participants are the primary pool of candidates for SMOC’s part of the program. FSS provides the hospitals with motivated and supported trainees and the FSS program gains a promising route to stable employment at a living wage.

Both of these collaborations rely on the same resources that the practitioners brought to the initiatives they pursued independent of their agencies. The motivated and supported FSS clients, the energy and commitment of the FSS practitioners, the promise of funding, and the leverage of the Community Reinvestment Act were all resources that the practitioners leveraged in the aforementioned efforts. Like the other collaborative efforts, they also afforded benefits to each of the partners and the gains from working together were the result of concerted efforts of actors with different skills rather than simply the exchange of discrete contributions.

At the same time, the involvement of agency directors and managers afforded interaction with a larger number of high-level decision-makers with access to considerably more funding than the FSS practitioners were able leverage independently. Many of these resources required contractual arrangements between organizational entities that the frontline practitioners lacked the authority to pursue on their own. In fact, the FSS practitioners’ contributions to each of these endeavors were most pronounced once the programs were established than in the planning phases.

The relatively minor role of frontline practitioners in designing these initiatives does not, however, imply that the anticipation of their contributions was not vital to forging the partnerships. Indeed, MBHP’s efforts to pursue Department of Labor funding together with Boston area community development corporations and a well-established employment and training program fell through, in part, due to the insufficient frontline support. When it became clear that the initiative would require more participants than those enrolled in FSS, MBHP unsuccessfully sought participation from frontline Section 8 workers in recruiting additional tenants.

Collaboration and Advocacy and the Practitioner Discussion Forums: The FSS practitioners were also able to leverage additional resources for collaborative ventures and advocacy efforts by joining forces with members of the practitioner discussion forums. For
example, each of the practitioners entered the FSS-Fleet Loan Program in the shaded added-value box. This award-winning collaboration initiated by the members of the Massachusetts FSS Coordinators Group – the discussion forum of the practitioners who work in public housing authorities – engaged Fleet Bank and the nonprofit Consumer Credit Counseling Services in designing a loan program for FSS participants who could not qualify for regular personal loans due to their low-income and poor credit history.

As a result of the program, FSS clients received market rate loans of $500 to $5,000 for two to five year terms, amounts far greater than the cap of $150 of SSHDC’s revolving loan fund that requires repayment within six months. The participants also gained intensive one-on-one financial counseling, the chance to consolidate pre-existing debt, and the benefits of improved credit ratings once they paid back the loan. Moreover, the program was replicated with FSS programs in other northeastern states. Ultimately, the program was discontinued when Fleet Bank merged with Bank of America which had a different approach to fulfilling its obligations under the CRA. Yet during its four years of operation, hundreds of FSS clients received loans totaling over $500,000. (See Table 4.7 for a comparison between this loan fund and Janine’s described above.)

Most of the value-added boxes also included the product of the nonprofit FSS practitioner forums’ efforts to advocate for designated childcare vouchers on behalf of clients who were not eligible under the state’s rules. The practitioners prepared and presented a report to state welfare department elaborating the unmet needs of their clients who were not eligible for TANF-linked assistance or who required additional hours of childcare to allow them to attend job training and college courses in addition to work. They won fifty new slots for FSS participants as a result of their appeal. Although, unfortunately, some of the local offices did not honor this agreement, the effort does indicate that a united front of frontline workers is capable of persuading state-level decision makers to allocate additional resources.

Summary and Assessment of Techniques for Raising Expectations of Programs and Policies: This fourth category of creative street-level coordination yielded the most substantial gains from working together across organizational boundaries. As in the third category where the practitioners aligned their high expectations with those of their partners, these connections augment programmatic resources so that the practitioner’s entire caseload of FSS participants benefit. In the fourth category, FSS practitioners join with other system actors to create entirely
| Description | **One Practitioner**  
SSHDC's Revolving Loan Fund | **Forum of Practitioners**  
FSS Fleet Loan Program |
|---|---|---|
| **No interest loans up to $150 to be paid back over 6 months.**  
Must participate in fundraising  
Committee of participants and staff approves | Market rate personal loans for $500 – 5,000 for 24 to 60 month terms.  
1. Good standing in FSS, employed, income, credit rating  
Nonprofit assesses; Bank approves; FSS Coordinators refer |
| **Relationships Developed**  
with participants  
participant support groups  
area business people  
home agency staff | Fleet Bank  
Consumer Credit Counseling Services  
FSS Coordinators Group & Task Force |
| **Goals of Partners**  
outreach to potential participants and customers  
public image aligned with values resonant for public  
internal agency relations | address financial and credit needs of low-income population with minimal risks and long term viability  
outreach to potential consumers of other services  
public image aligned with values resonant for public |
| **Emergent FSS Goals Addressed**  
accountability  
empowerment  
recognition  
role models for children  
project planning skills developed | debt consolidation  
credit repair  
financial advice and literacy  
practitioner learning about credit industry, collaboration  
increased practitioner and client motivation and recognition  
pilot for model replication and further experimentation |
| **Replication Issues**  
support from agency for fundraising and managing fund  
program and community resources widely replicable | replication under-way throughout Northeast  
necessary role of FSS practitioners in program dissemination/buy-in  
facilitating role of FSS practitioner discussion forums in program dissemination  
spurred development of additional loan programs by CCCS |
| **Sustainability Issues**  
dependency on staff commitment to group facilitation and participant motivation to engage in project influence of new opportunities | subject to changes in market interest rates  
subject to revisions by Fleet Bank  
implications of Fleet-Bank of America merger |
new resources. In some of the examples, the benefits are enjoyed by FSS participants throughout the state or – as in the case of the FSS Fleet Loan program – throughout the entire northeast. In others, as in the Southbridge Transportation Coalition’s new bus service or the BEST hospital sector program, the entire community benefits in addition to FSS participants.

The gains from these collaborations and advocacy efforts are especially significant to improving FSS practice because they address the inadequacies of the existing service delivery system the practitioners identified as the most detrimental to their clients’ progress towards self-sufficiency. Examples in this category introduced financial counseling, credit repair, and emergency funding not available from other sources as well as new childcare resources, transportation services, and career development programs.

The interorganizational alliances that produced these more substantial benefits involved partnerships with system actors beyond the more familiar domains of housing and social services. Lenders, employers, local businesses, community members, legislators, and other policy makers are more prevalent in this category of creative coordination practices than in each of the other categories. These partners thus extended the practitioners’ repertoire of services, expertise, contacts, and realms of influence. In exchange, the FSS practitioners connected their partners with their target populations of low-income clients who are motivated to make life changes and supported through the incentives and case management of the program – all resources that these partners lacked and required to meet their objectives. In addition to the exchange of these resources, partners were also motivated to join forces with the FSS practitioners to apply for otherwise inaccessible funding sources and in response to institutions such as CRA obligations, the state’s commitment to keeping low-income people off the welfare rolls, and the widely held values of helping those who seek to help themselves.

These examples of creative street-level coordination not only forged connections with partners beyond their traditional realms of practice, they also tended to involve multiple partners rather than the typically dyadic relationships of the other three categories. Consequently, creating these alliances required additional skills of working collaboratively. The projects entailed convening the actors, developing and refining proposals, seeking out resources to put them into action, and ongoing coordination of the efforts. Unlike the adjustment to routines and shorter-term efforts of the other categories, many of these initiatives also evolved over time. To sustain these projects, the practitioners and their partners had to respond to changes in the
implementation environment such as the maturation of the FSS program in Janine’s loan fund, the termination of funding sources as in Rachelle’s transit coalition, and the opportunity to expand the FSS Fleet Loan Program.

This complexity may explain why the practitioners who engaged in collaboration and advocacy strategies were those who had established the greatest number of value-adding connections overall, for all of the reasons discussed in the previous section—geographic proximity to partners, tenure in the position, and a supportive agency staff and management. The influence of agency management is particularly noteworthy. In some cases, the lack of support undermined the FSS practitioners’ collaborative efforts, as Sherry’s Career Closet and fundraising attempts evidence. Janine’s experience with the loan fund suggests that such projects can also enhance appreciation of the program within the agency. And the agency initiated programs of HAC and SMOC indicate how much more collaboration is feasible with the commitment of higher level decision makers.

While the agency initiated collaborative ventures surface the limitations of what frontline practitioners can do independently, the FSS Fleet Loan Program and the successful advocacy for childcare vouchers point to the creative potential of the community of practice. In the following chapter, I examine the FSS Fleet Loan Program and other advocacy efforts in greater detail so as to explicate how the practitioner discussion forums engage in this type of creative street-level practice and the conditions that make their efforts more feasible.

4.4 Conclusions About the Feasibility of Creative Street-Level Coordination

Street-Level Coordination as a Creative Practice: FSS practitioners’ descriptions of their interactions with colleagues in the service delivery system suggest that creative street-level coordination is indeed feasible even in the absence of formal mandates or incentives to induce interorganizational cooperation. All of these practitioners have established referral networks of providers of a broad range of the services FSS clients require to pursue their self-sufficiency goals. According to the FSS practitioners’ assessments, many of their personal relationships with their counterparts in other organizations allow them to ameliorate inadequacies of the disjointed, complex, and under-funded service delivery system. The practitioners perceive these efforts as adding value to the services their clients would receive if they were to seek them on their own.
The practitioners’ characterization of the value gained from their interactions with service partners fits both dimensions of my definition of creative street-level practice. Their narratives described how such interactions involved departures from routine referral, and in some cases, changes in their partners’ work practices. The practitioners considered these changes to be valuable because they enhance access to existing resources, increase the resources available to FSS clients, or augment the practitioners’ capacity for effective case management. The improvements generated through these inter-organizational relationships fall along a spectrum ranging from subtle modifications of the FSS practitioners’ own referral routines to novel systems of cooperation to the creation of entirely new program elements.

Findings from the analysis of the practitioners’ explanations of their value adding connections is consistent with the theory that cooperation and collaboration depend on the extent of the perceived interdependence among actors. Where partners’ goals were compatible with those of FSS, the practitioners were more likely to have employed those technologies of coordination and collaboration that involve more extensive changes in behavior and produce the most gains in resources. Although the FSS practitioners were rarely able to offer concrete resources in exchange for partners’ services, their ability to help with outreach and selection, their knowledge about their clients needs and behaviors, and their commitment to supporting their clients’ efforts to use services effectively proved critical to the techniques they described. At the same time, gains were greatest where partners’ competencies and resources were the most distinct from those of the FSS practitioners, provided that partners had the discretion to make decisions that depart from routine procedures.

In addition to these characteristics of the program designs and the roles of the actors involved, findings suggest that the degree to which relationships generated additional value is a function of what the FSS practitioners do to change actors’ conceptions of what is feasible to achieve. To employ each of the four categories of techniques of creative coordination, the FSS practitioners identify the potential for joint action and take active steps to take advantage of it.

Consistent with theories of inter-organizational relations, the FSS practitioners were more inclined to engage in the techniques of value creation when they perceived their partners to be competent at providing quality services and committed to helping clients. Yet in contrast to Jodi Sandfort’s (1999) observations that insufficient trust in partners’ capacity results in failed street-level coordination, the FSS practitioners described their efforts to adapt their own routines to
compensate for partners’ weaknesses. While these adjustments to expectations of what is feasible to expect from existing resources result in only modest improvements, they do more to help clients than rationalizing the resort to coping mechanisms.

Furthermore, my findings show that, when possible, the FSS practitioners actively seek out those partners whom they believe to be more competent and more willing to engage in the work of improving services for clients. Unlike the frontline workers described in the research reviewed in Part I, the FSS practitioners thus strive to satisfy program goals and clients’ needs by stepping beyond the state-agent and client-agent dyads to choose appropriate relationships within the informal network of service providers. This capacity to choose is, in part, a function of the FSS program design. Whereas the policies dictated that workers in the welfare and employment placement offices Sandfort studied cooperate (or at least coordinate) with one another, the FSS program is designed to encourage practitioners to engage with a variety of service partners. The choice of partners to choose from adds to the FSS practitioners’ burden of responsibility that—given the constraints of limited leverage to induce cooperation, minimal prior experience or guidance in forging relationships, and scare time to pursue them—could lead them to resort to merely mechanical or overly-routinized referral practices. Against this option to fulfill the minimal, procedural requirements of the job, the practitioners efforts to find partners and develop working relations with them draws on the resources of their intrinsic motivation to improve their capacity to help their clients succeed.

Also in the repertoire of FSS practitioners’ responses to the challenges of overcoming disparities in the commitment to appropriate service provision are their techniques for improving communication and ensuring the accountability of partners and clients to program expectations. These efforts are consistent with Vinzant and Crothers’ concept of “street-level leadership.” The practitioners legitimate their exercise of discretion in consultation with members of the broader community of practice of service providers. Where necessary, they also persuade both partners and clients to raise their expectations of what is feasible to accomplish so that all actors try their best. Such persuasion contrasts with evidence from recent studies of welfare reform implementation that show how frontline workers’ pre-existing beliefs about program goals prevent them from actively pursuing the self-sufficiency agenda. The examples of these acts of persuasion also evidence the practitioners’ efforts to stimulate intrinsic motivation among their colleagues. In the absence of material resources to incentivize cooperation, they appeal to the
common sense of purpose, whether dictated by mutual program goals or prompted by shared values and commitment to caring for clients.

Some examples of the practitioners’ descriptions of this type of interaction could be considered situational adjustments for particular clients in specific circumstances instead of improvements to ongoing practice or program operations. In fact, in some cases, forum members questioned the legitimacy of extending special privileges to FSS clients despite the general agreement among members of the community of FSS and other service practitioners that such arrangements are appropriate. These qualifications notwithstanding, most of the practitioners’ explanations for why their connections add value referenced the specific examples as illustrations of the techniques they apply to their work with other clients and other partners. Practitioners’ also spoke of the cumulative effects of these interactions on enhancing their knowledge of the service system and in developing the trusting relationships that facilitate more extensive value-adding cooperation in subsequent interactions.

The techniques of the third and fourth categories allow the FSS practitioners to produce more substantial gains from working with partners that yield more obvious changes in ongoing program operations. Both FSS practitioners and their partners adopt new ways of working together; they change their routines and develop new structures for interaction in order to take advantage of the synergies among participating actors’ resources and competencies. To do so FSS practitioners seek to align their expectations of what is feasible to accomplish with those of their partners through more intensive and ongoing interaction and than has been observed in previous studies of street-level behavior. Where potential partners are unfamiliar with the FSS program’s needs and where state officials have been disinclined to support certain services, the practitioners strive to redirect expectations to include their vision for collaboration or changes to funding allocations.

**Conditions Conducive to Creative Street-Level Coordination:** Although the practitioners have used these techniques to engage actors in other organizations in their efforts to improve the FSS program and its operations, findings also suggest that there is considerable “latent potential” yet to be explored and exploited. While they have forged relationships with organizations dedicated to workforce development, education, and other programs that are key to the program’s goal of career development, relatively few of these have led to innovative new practices and programs. Nor have the practitioners developed working relationships with
employers in their regions. The fact that the two collaborative projects initiated by agency directors did involve major regional employers is an indication that there may be more opportunities than these street-level workers were able to pursue on their own.

Evidence from the research also surfaced variation in the FSS practitioners’ capacity to connect with potential partners and engage them in value adding interactions. My analysis found that the physical and administrative geography, organizational context, practitioners’ background, and the degree of cohesion among service providers influenced the number of personal contacts in the practitioners’ referral networks and the proportion of these that contributed to program improvements. Identifying potential partners and engaging them in improvements to ongoing practice proved more feasible where housing agency priorities afforded the FSS practitioners time to devote to networking and where managers helped forge connections with potential partners. Creative coordination was also more pervasive in regions with systems for providers to interact with one another on a regular basis, whether informally or through inter-agency forums. These findings are significant because it is possible for managers to create such conditions to make creative street-level coordination more feasible.

Findings also point to the capacity of some of the practitioners to create organizing structures for coordination on their own. Some established informal systems for regular interaction with their counterparts across agency departments and in other organizations while others convened their colleagues in PCCs or similar committees. The observed correlation between the extensiveness of the referral networks and the practitioners’ tenure in the FSS program suggests that developing productive inter-organizational connections is a skill that can be developed. It also points to the value of retaining program staff so that their connections and experience in making connections is not lost to turnover.

**Recognizing Street-Level Effort and the Limits of Feasible Expectations:** Finally, this research points to the value of acknowledging efforts to engage partners in improving programs in addition to actual accomplishments. The research instrument that generated the findings was designed to elicit accounts of the practitioners’ efforts to address the challenges of connecting clients to the services they require. These narratives allowed me to appreciate contributions that might otherwise have been too subtle for an outsider to discern. It is thus the basis for further research that would link these efforts to actual outcomes for clients.
Yet this discussion of findings does not imply that frontline workers’ efforts are sufficient to compensate for fundamentally limited program designs, inadequate budgets, and insufficient organizing structures to bring system actors together more productively. Rather, I posit that street-level practitioners can contribute to the work of improving programs and can even develop their capacity to do so, yet they cannot do it all on their own.

The following chapter explores how pursuing these techniques of creative coordination together with their peers in the practitioner discussion forums enhances these efforts.
CHAPTER 5
Creative Street-Level Coordination and the Practitioner Discussion Forums

The role of communities of practice was a recurring theme in the previous chapter on creative street-level coordination. In some respects the practitioners' informal networks of fellow service providers resemble communities of practice. Many of the colleagues with whom the FSS practitioners engage in the techniques of creative coordination share common concerns and a passion for helping clients. In addition, each of the categories of value-adding connections entails deepening knowledge about the work, at least on the part of the FSS practitioners. (See the row labeled "latent potential" in Table 4.6.)

The inter-organizational forums where several of the FSS practitioners have met and developed working relationships with many of their colleagues share more of the characteristics of communities of practice than the informal exchanges with one partner at a time. Members of service provider forums come together to deepen their knowledge about common challenges and to develop their expertise to address them through ongoing interaction. Although I did not study these groups extensively, the practitioners' descriptions suggest that participation in these forums facilitates creative coordination because of the deepened understanding of one another's perspectives and priorities. It is not clear, however, if members of these forums also develop enduring relationships and a shared sense of identity and belonging as members of a group of caring social service practitioners. Nor did the FSS practitioners report that they gained a sense of collective-efficacy as a result of their participation in these groups. Members of the collaborative project teams, such as Janine’s client-driven loan fund, Rachelle’s transit initiative, and the agency-initiated joint ventures, may have developed participants feeling of having power to act collectively. Yet these groups do not constitute communities of street-level practitioners.

The FSS discussion forums also proved critical for several of the collaborative ventures discussed in the previous chapter. The comparison between Janine’s program-specific loan fund and the FSS-Fleet Loan Program established by the public forum clearly demonstrates the relative power of the collective efforts of members of a community of practice (Table 4.7). In this chapter, I explore how participation in the discussion forums fosters the practitioners’ efforts to coordinate with other system actors, both within their distinct service districts and collectively when the forums pursue collaborative projects and advocacy together.
I first discuss how coming together on a regular basis to share experiences of linking clients to existing services fosters each of the techniques discussed in the previous chapter. In the two following sections, I explore in greater depth the stories of the practitioners’ collective efforts to pursue the fourth category techniques of collaboration and policy advocacy as they developed over time. Comparison between the efforts of the discussion forum comprised of FSS practitioners from Massachusetts’ public housing authorities and that of the nonprofit agencies featured thus far in this chapter affords further analysis of the role of the community of practice in these strategies of creative street-level coordination.

5.1 Practitioner Discussion Forums and the Categories of Creative Coordination

In my observations of the FSS discussion forums, I heard members share what they learned from their interactions with service partners so that their peers could help their clients navigate the bureaucratic systems of state agencies and regional nonprofits more effectively. They also updated one another about changing regulations and funding cutbacks and let each other know about workshops and other opportunities for FSS clients and their own career development. The practitioners also invited their colleagues to give presentations about such topics in the meetings. These exchanges of information were a product of the techniques of the first category of creative coordination. Sharing them with members of the community of practice expanded the reach of the knowledge gained from practitioners’ interactions with other system actors.

In addition, forum members sometimes deliberated with one another about how engage service partners in the second category of coordination techniques. They discussed how to handle conflicting priorities when satisfying a particular client’s needs might jeopardize a relationship with a partner or potentially divert resources from other clients.

The creative coordination techniques of the second two categories proved more challenging to share with fellow forum members because they depend on relationships forged with specific partners in distinct service districts. Although, the practitioners share common concerns and the desire to learn from one another, these differences impede their capacity to apply those lessons in practice. Paul Carlile’s (2004) distinction between three types of knowledge production helps to assess the potential for lesson taking within the forums. Depending on the extent of different experiences and expertise among the actors engaged in collective learning, they may simply **transfer** knowledge directly to one another or they must **translate** understandings and routines...
for them to be comprehensible. When differences are substantial, joint knowledge production requires actors to transform practices in order for the learning to take place. Carlile finds that this progression of differences among partners in learning corresponds to increasing degrees of novelty generated from the interactions.

In only a few cases did my observations of forum discussions evidence creative cooperative arrangements that were directly transferable from one practitioner to another. For example, SMOC was able to adopt MHBP’s arrangements with the Family to Family program because the western suburbs were part of the foundation’s operating jurisdiction. Sharing materials from workshops is another example of the transfer of resources gained from one forum member’s connections to others. In other cases, the practitioners were able to adapt their peer’s practice by engaging with similar partners in their areas. Invitations to conduct workshops for FSS practitioners are examples of such translation of practices.

In other cases, coordination practices might have been replicable if the practitioners had already fostered the relationships to pursue them. For example, others might have been able to replicate Tina’s arrangement with the local bank with lending institutions in their service areas if they had the personal connections with key decision makers that Tina made with the help of her executive director. Given that several of the MNPHA agencies have lenders on their boards of directors, some of the forum members might have the opportunity to forge such liaisons. Even if they had help from agency directors to forge connections with lenders, relative newcomers to the forum did have opportunities to learn about Tina’s program as they did not hear her discuss it when the partnership was in formation. Nor was the story of its development retained in the group’s collective memory. Similarly, newcomers with community connections similar to Janine’s would not have learned about the SSHDC revolving loan fund because Janine and Joanne rarely mentioned it in the years in which I observed the forum meetings.

Furthermore, many of the more complex examples of cooperation and collaboration required more substantial modification, or transformation, to work in other areas. Tina’s informal group for allocating resources among area clients would require providers to fundamentally transform their decision making practices and Rachelle’s transit coalition would be difficult to replicate in other areas without changing the way agencies and residents work together. Indeed, the idea for the FSS Fleet Loan program emerged in response to frustrated attempts of members of the public agencies’ FSS forum to replicate a loan program similar to Janine’s. Some of those forum
members were not able to secure approval from their supervisors or directors to open a dedicated
checking account to pay out the loans and some were not allowed to approve interim disbursals
from their clients’ escrow accounts – an optional practice described in the FSS regulations –
because their directors were reluctant to grant the practitioners discretion over such financial
decisions and transactions. Other forum members expressed insecurity about taking
responsibility for creating such a program on their own.

Pursuing a loan program as a collective endeavor of the forum members proved to be an
effective strategy for transforming the individual practitioners’ models to ones that would
address the common needs of all of the FSS participants that did not depend on the consent of
housing authority leadership. This type of collective enterprise of the group of practitioners was
key to each of the street-level initiated collaborative ventures and advocacy efforts evidenced in
this study, with the exception of Rachelle’s transit project. To act as a cohesive group required
the members to learn how to work together as well as how to engage higher-level decision
makers in more complex projects. In the following sections, I tell the stories of this process of
capacity development.

5.2 The Story of the FSS-Fleet Loan Program

The story of the evolution of the FSS-Fleet Loan program illuminates the learning process of
the members of the discussion forum of the FSS practitioners from public housing authorities as
well as the development of the capacity of the group to act collectively and get recognized as a
cohesive unit.

**Pro-Active Exploration:** Whereas Tina developed the project with her local bank at the
instigation of her executive director and already interested bank officials, the FSS-Fleet Loan
Program began with the proactive explorations of a task force of five forum members. As none
of the team members had any prior experience with the lending industry, their first step was to
investigate options for a model they might replicate as a group. Early in their investigation,
however, the group realized that a state-wide program would be too difficult to self-manage.
Legal and financial concerns about where to hold the funds and who would be accountable for
defaulted loans proved insurmountable.

Discussions about lending and credit systems with one of the practitioners’ contacts at her
local CCCS office led the team to pursue a more formal alliance with a lending institution. A
bank affiliation was attractive because it would not only afford clients access to larger loans; it would also alleviate the practitioners and their housing authorities of the responsibility for loan assessment and management and the legal risks of defaults. Together with the services of CCCS, the partnership would also extend the original idea of the fund to include credit repair and financial counseling services. These services were considered especially valuable in light of the increasing emphasis on homeownership at HUD and among the agencies.

In October of 2000, following recommendations from CCCS, the group contacted several CRA point people at regional banks and quickly established a personal rapport with Rosa Tolera of Fleet Bank. Her understanding of the group’s goals and her familiarity with the social service world made the practitioners feel more comfortable with her than they did with her counterparts at other banks. From Rosa’s perspective, the prospects of the alliance were also promising. Rosa was especially committed to initiatives that included hands-on interactions with service providers who worked with low-income people. Given the national scope of the FSS program, she easily persuaded bank officials of the potential to scale up the program by replicating it in the other northeastern states where the bank did business. Not only did the proposal promise to boost Fleet’s CRA compliance ratings. The alliance with the CCCS and FSS practitioners also offered the bank a pool of pre-selected and especially motivated low-income clients as well as the ongoing monitoring and support of FSS case management. CCCS gained a steady flow of clients and fees for their assessments at a rate substantially higher than they were able to charge clients as well as experience working closely with lenders.

**Program Design Through Learning, Negotiation, and Persuasion:** The partners entered the pilot phase of the initiative with the advantage of recognizing these interdependencies. Yet in contrast to HAC's savings for home ownership collaboration modeled on other individual asset development programs and the guidelines of the RFP of SMOC’s hospital sector career ladder program, the FSS practitioners’ and their partners needed to create their own model. The team of FSS practitioners met with bank officials and their CCCS partners numerous times from November of 2000 to the program's official launch in late January of 2002.

This long planning phase was partly a function of the geographic and time constraints of the FSS team who pursued the venture on top of their FSS case management and other responsibilities in their own agencies that spanned Shrewsbury in central Massachusetts, Methuen and North Andover on the North Shore, Acton, and Boston. E-mail correspondence,
conference calls, and meetings in what the practitioners’ described as the initially intimidating executive conference rooms of the bank’s downtown offices helped the partners overcome these physical challenges. Yet as the task force members recalled, each of the partners to the collaboration faced a steep learning curve given the wide differences between service providers’ and lenders’ chief concerns and styles of communication.

The practitioners learned about prime rates, credit ratings, delinquency and default policies. Their partners relied on the practitioner team to explicate the FSS program’s goals and regulations and introduce them to their new “customers,” as the lenders referred to the program participants, with respect to their financial challenges and commitment to becoming economically self-sufficient as well as their income levels and employment histories. To respond to the bank’s information requests, the team also investigated FSS programs in Massachusetts and throughout the northeast, an endeavor that required correspondence with HUD officials in Washington, D.C. as well as the members of their own practitioner discussion forum. In addition, the practitioners explicated their case management practice and their experience monitoring participants’ compliance with good tenancy rules as well as their progress towards achieving employment goals. This understanding of the practitioners’ capacity to evaluate candidates who are likely to pay back their loans informed the criteria for loan approval along with the CCCS assessment of their credit ratings and disposable income.

As the loan product design emerged, the FSS team brought some dilemma to the entire forum for input and deliberation. Their collective experience with their clientele informed their decision that opening a Fleet savings or checking account would be an acceptable vehicle for receipt of the loan provided that the account would be free of charge and that there would be no fees for overdrafts. On the question of how the loan recipients should receive notification of the approval, forum members weighed trade-offs between expedience and the sense of the clients’ need for explanation and guidance and decided that the procedures should require recipients to go to their local branch. The forum also discussed guidelines for monitoring potential delinquencies and concerns about maintaining confidentiality and their need for FSS practitioner training for initial eligibility determination.

Other decisions required negotiation and compromise. One conflict that emerged in the design of the pilot loan product concerned the eligibility of clients with a history of credit failures. The FSS practitioners were concerned that those provisions would exclude a substantial
number of clients who are most in need of alternatives to existing loan options. After the bank partners consulted with their legal experts, they agreed to allow loans to clients who had previously filed for bankruptcy as long as they have had relatively clean credit in the past two years. FDIC regulations prevented the bank from offering loans to those in debt to the federal government, including those with defaulted school loans that are common among FSS participants.

Other compromises concerned the scope of the pilot phase and its implications for forum membership. Because CCCS demanded payment for its services—a demand the FSS practitioners did not make for their own contributions of case management time—assessments required for loan applications would be limited to 200 applicants. On the one hand, this limitation raised concerns about including clients of practitioners who had not regularly attended meetings in the pilot for fear of dissipating the resource they had worked so hard to obtain. On the other hand, the task force leaders were not confident that the core forum participants would actually be able to identify sufficient qualified applicants to take advantage of the 200 slots. Although only a few of the FSS practitioners from the MNPHA agencies had attended the public forum meetings prior to the loan project, the group decided to include them in the pilot phase because their relatively large client loans promised to establish that there is a large demand for the loan product. As it turned out, this foresight was fortuitous. Identifying qualified applicants proved more challenging than initially anticipated and the clientele of the nonprofits comprised just over half of loan beneficiaries. By September of 2003, just prior to the end of the pilot phase, clients of just four of the MNPHA organizations accounted for 68 of the 136 applications and 58 of the 114 approved loans.

The cap on assessments also forced the practitioners to invest more time in training one another to conduct preliminary assessments of potential clients’ ability to repay loans so as to reduce the number of assessments that would fail to lead to approved loans. This initial screening proved to be a time consuming endeavor that the practitioners had not anticipated. At the suggestion of the practitioners, Fleet produced a bilingual educational video for potential FSS applicants to facilitate promotion of the loan as well as appropriate eligibility screening.

The task loan force also found that they needed to persuade the forum membership that the loan product was indeed a good deal for their clients. Although the loan program was clearly more extensive than the initial conception, the interest rate of 9.99% was significantly higher
than the group had anticipated. Only after task force members explained what they had learned about prime rates and industry standards did they succeed in persuading the group to finalize the project. Also persuasive were forum members’ accounts of predatory lending and interest rates as high as 32% for some store-based credit cards and cumulative charges on unpaid bills.

**Getting Recognition for the Loan Project and the Forum:** By the early spring of 2003, 76 FSS participants had received FSS-Fleet loans. This success inspired the task force members to nominate the loan project for National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials (NAHRO) Award of Merit. The project received the award and the group celebrated the recognition at the May 2003 meeting of the discussion forum together with partners from Fleet and CCCS. Reflecting on the event, task force members consider this recognition to be instrumental in Fleet and CCCS’ willingness to expand the program beyond the pilot phase.

However, others did not see the award in same light. Although the award was directed to the entire group of FSS practitioners involved in the design and implementation of the program, NAHRO’s administrative procedures required that notification be sent to only one housing authority. The executive director of the agency on whose letterhead the proposal was submitted demanded that the FSS practitioner represent the accomplishment at a local press conference, without acknowledging the collective nature of the endeavor. When she refused to comply with the request, he threatened dismissal. This frustration prompted this practitioner to resign after years of dedicated service to the agency and the FSS program and her fellow awardees reluctantly attended the award ceremony without her.

Subsequent recognition of the program has been more successful at highlighting the collaboration among practitioners from multiple housing authorities. When the project was selected for the more competitive NAHRO Award of Excellence,¹ housing authority directors approved travel costs for task force members and although the director who had insisted on the solo press conference accompanied the group, the FSS practitioners accepted the award. The group has also responded to a number of requests to present the program to audiences of HA administrators and other housing and services practitioners.² These events served to solidify

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¹ The FSS-Fleet Loan Program was one of 22 recipients for the award and one of only six in the category of program innovations for resident and client services.

² Among these events were two workshops I co-facilitated with FSS practitioners at annual training conferences of the New England Resident Service Coordinator association.
external impressions of the Massachusetts FSS Coordinators Group as cohesive unit, capable of collective action as well as an informal group of disconnected frontline workers.

**Replication and the Power of the Community of Practice:** After the pilot phase, Fleet and CCCS were eager to replicate the program in other northeastern states. Interestingly, the Massachusetts FSS practitioners proved instrumental to these expansion efforts. When the bank representatives first presented the program to an audience of FSS practitioners in Connecticut, they faced resistance rather than the anticipated appreciation of the opportunity. Fleet’s poor reputation in community lending in that state did not help to win the practitioners’ trust.\(^3\) Only after the task force members were invited to present the loan program and explain their role in its design were Connecticut’s FSS practitioners receptive to the idea. Learning from this lesson in the value of communication within the extended community of FSS practitioners, Fleet included the task force in its efforts to market the program in Rhode Island. There, the absence of an organized group of practitioners thwarted expansion; the audience for the presentation constituted only a small fraction of the state’s FSS programs. Even with the addition of the educational video, the regular meetings of the practitioner discussion forums proved to be vital for training FSS practitioners to administer their part of the outreach and application process and in providing the necessary ongoing support to answer questions and resolve logistical and other practice problems.

**Adapting To Change:** After the pilot phase, following 106 approved loans of which five were in arrears of more than 30 days and 16 in default, the bank instituted new requirements. The maximum loan amount decreased and the interest rate increased to 12.9% in accordance with the rise in market rates, and Fleet raised the credit score required for approval. The changes in the loan amount and rate were discussed in depth with the task force and then introduced by bank representatives at a meeting of the FSS discussion forum. However, the change in the credit score requirements was discovered in the course of practice, as participants who would have been approved under the previous rules were denied loans. These observations led to informal conversations with the bank representatives and were eventually discussed in the

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\(^3\) Fleet earned CRA ranking of “satisfactory” for several pre-merger evaluation periods throughout all of its service areas with the exception of Mass where it was “outstanding.” Fleet’s traditional lending practices and account types for individuals and small businesses were considered only “adequately” responsive to low and moderate income individuals and communities. The bank performed equally or slightly behind the performance standard of other banks on most tests of lending and services for LMI status. (Source: “The Community Reinvestment Act: Why It Matters to Child Advocates.” by Joseph Fishkin, CT Voices Policy Intern, Yale University, no date. http://info.med.yale.edu/chldstdy/Ctvoices/kidslink/kidslink2/finance/tax%20a../resinvest99.htm)
practitioner discussion forum both with the bank representatives and among the members of the community of practice.

While the practitioners agreed that the lower maximum loan was an appropriate adaptation and understood that the rise in interest rate was beyond any of the partners’ control, they were upset about the unilaterally imposed change in credit scores. After reviewing the arrears and default rates with the bank representatives – and hearing that they were in line with industry expectations – the practitioners proposed two amendments to the bank’s proposed changes. First, drawing from their repertoire of practices for exchanging confidential information with their service partners, the practitioners requested that release forms be produced and distributed to loan applicants so that the bank would be able to notify the FSS practitioners when loan recipients were late on payments. Previously, confidentiality laws had prevented the practitioners from developing more reliable repayment routines and devising solutions to unexpected expenditures, challenges that often resulted in the clients’ need for the loans in first place. This lack of information about repayment status was problematic even where practitioners felt they had solid relationships with clients as the same avoidance strategies that enable clients to cope with overwhelming financial obligations also influence their inclination to initiate assistance from their FSS case managers.

The second proposal was informed by the practitioners’ newly acquired understanding of lending practices. They proposed that the original credit ratings continue to apply to loans requested specifically for debt consolidation. The bank representatives agreed to these demands and the members of the FSS community of practice agreed to monitor compliance with this commitment carefully.

As in earlier stages, reaching this compromise also required deliberation among forum members. In the debriefing after the bank representatives (Rosa and Sarah) concluded their presentation of the proposed changes in the September 15, 2003 meeting, the practitioners debated the advantages and disadvantages of continuing the partnership. Some practitioners felt they were being taken advantage of and that the group lacked sufficient influence to protect the interests of their clients. Suzanne’s response helped shift the tone from nervous frustration to reserved optimism. She said:
We do (have influence). We have the participants. They (Fleet) want[s] to take it to a national model. If they don’t have clients they can’t do it. ... The rate increase is hard. But the maximum amount isn’t different. But then there’s the change in scores! We need to keep close tabs on what happens with debt consolidation, to see if they’re approved. We do have ammunition. ...”

Ultimately, the decision about whether to continue the partnership with Fleet Bank was decided by actors external to the collaboration. Fleet’s merger with Bank of America instituted a change in CRA policy from smaller projects to larger scale products and a relocation of decision making away from the New England branches of the bank. Moreover, Rosa Tolera, the primary spokesperson for the Fleet FSS loan, was laid off and consequently, the practitioners feelings of loyalty to Fleet diminished precipitously. Street-level influence was sufficient to reign in some of the bank’s decisions, yet was insufficient to counter national policy or major corporate decisions.

**Cumulative Learning:** Over the course of pursuing the project, the task force members and the practitioner discussion forum as a whole accumulated knowledge they applied to future endeavors. Not only did the entire forum membership learn about the lending and credit industries from discussions with the task force members and the project partners at trainings and regular meetings. The experience with operating the loan fund also inspired members of both FSS practitioner forums to jointly organize two series of certificate-granting courses on financial counseling and predatory lending.

Reflecting on the experience, task force members recounted that they gained more from the experience of designing and implementing the loan fund than they did from product itself. They said that skills in collaboration, and more confidence in approaching private sector partners and in doing so without excessive compromises.

This sense of confidence is currently guiding the Massachusetts FSS Practitioners Group to explore new areas for collaboration. In addition to pursuing alternative lending partners for the loan program, newly formed task forces have begun investigations towards designing a state-wide FSS car purchase program, a state-wide newsletter, a personal life-coaching program for FSS participants, and a program to provide income and other supports to FSS participants who are pursuing higher education. In addition, the original task force members have formed a fundraising committee to secure resources for these programs.
5.3 Stories of Street-Level Advocacy: The Nonprofit and Public Forums' Efforts to Preserve Protect the FSS Program

In this section, I draw comparisons between the advocacy efforts of the two FSS discussion forums – the one comprised of practitioners from the nonprofit agencies and the one of those from public housing agencies – with respect to early endeavors to change state policies and service budgets for FSS participants and with respect to their responses to HUD’s proposal to revamp the FSS program. The comparison illuminates the conditions that facilitate collective action, particularly the tension between support from agency directors and the group’s autonomy to pursue their own agenda. As in my accounts of other examples of creative street-level practice, my interest is in the practitioners’ efforts to work together to capture the attention of decision makers rather than the actual outcomes of these attempts to persuade decision makers to change policies and augment budgets.

**Advocacy for State Policy Changes to Support FSS:** I have already mentioned the nonprofit forum’s successful effort to secure additional childcare vouchers for FSS participants who would not otherwise be eligible for these scarce, state-funded resources. The public forum secured an almost identical agreement at about the same time, early in the FSS program’s history and in anticipation of the impacts of welfare reform time limits and other sanctions. Whereas the nonprofit forum members won an audience with high level state welfare department officials with the help of the forum’s chair and connections made through DHCD, the public forum reached its agreement by means of members’ own personal connections. The founding members of the public forum had developed this relationship shortly after the establishment of the FSS program when the senior welfare department official invited FSS practitioners along with other state service providers to brainstorm about how to prepare for the next round of welfare reform. Indeed, the public forum founders recall that this meeting was the inspiration for the establishment of the group.

The public forum’s success in securing designated childcare vouchers thus evidences that street-level practitioners can develop personal connections with officials who have the decision making authority to augment program resources. However, like their nonprofit counterparts, some members of the public forum had difficult convincing local vendors to honor this agreement. Again, personal connections with street-level actors proved essential to implementing the agreement with state-level officials. Moreover, the personal connections also proved to have a short life span. Public forum members’ more recent efforts to restore this
agreement fell through when they discovered that the officials who had helped them in the 1990s had retired and their successors had no memory of the earlier agreement.

Another difference between the nonprofit advocacy effort and that of the public forum is that it was part of a broader advocacy agenda whereas the public forum focused specifically on securing additional childcare vouchers. As I noted in the chapter on enrolling FSS participants, the nonprofit forum’s Legislative Sub-Committee prepared a position paper based on the experiences of each of the eight FSS programs that aimed to convince the state’s welfare department to exempt FSS participants who were enrolled in intensive educational programs from work requirements. During this early phase of the nonprofit forum’s history, it established additional sub-committees, several of which aimed to persuade state officials to allocate additional resources to meet FSS participants’ other pressing needs. The Alternative Economics Sub-Group discussed plans to hold a conference for service providers around the state to discuss the anticipated impacts of welfare assistance time limits. This task force also appealed to DHCD to convene a state-wide FSS Program Coordinating Committee (PCC) comprised of state- and regional-level decision makers that would discuss and institute ideas for coordinating existing programs more effectively and augmenting resources where services were particularly lacking.

In recognition that evidence of program effectiveness would enhance fundraising, collaboration, and advocacy efforts, the Fundraising Sub-Group initiated a self-directed evaluation of FSS. The group identified the key areas of concern and each practitioner submitted ideas for questions for a client survey. Unlike the other sub-groups that were led and comprised solely by the FSS practitioner themselves, the forum chair took the lead on the evaluation task. The full forum reviewed the survey form in July of 1999 and each practitioner sent it out to all FSS participants in their program. Forum members completed the surveys and hired a consultant to enter the data and analyze the results. However, a report of the results was never completed. Completion of the evaluation remained among the forum’s goals submitted for the Rental Assistance Committee’s for the following several years and although the evaluation continued to appear on the agenda for each of the forums meetings, discussion was postponed until the group finally decided to permanently abandon the project.

The nonprofit FSS forum did not resume advocacy efforts again until the fall of 2002 when several meetings were devoted to planning a Legislative Lobbying Day in the statehouse to request additional funding for workforce development programs and supportive services. The
group planned to use the findings gleaned from the engagement tool to support their claims that case management and service coordination were insufficient to help their clients achieve self-sufficiency. However, just prior to the scheduled event, the state announced massive budget cuts and the group decided to postpone the effort until the economic climate was more favorable.

In sum, both of these advocacy efforts suggest that, given access to state-level officials, street-level practitioners can join together to persuade them to modify policy and budget decisions. This influence is, however, contingent on the budget climate and the state’s overarching policy philosophy. The contrast between the forums also illuminates conditions that augment the practitioner discussion forum’s potential scope of influence. The nonprofit forum took advantage of the support of the forum’s Chair and the connections of agency directors and DHCD funders to pursue a more comprehensive state-policy and budget advocacy agenda than did their public counterpart. While this additional support did not ultimately result in the changes the practitioners sought, it does evidence the potential influence of external supports to practitioner groups both for facilitating planning and preparation and for gaining the attention of key decision makers.

Advocacy to Protect the FSS Program from the Threat of Federal Policy Changes:

The story of the two forum’s responses to HUD’s proposed changes to the FSS program reinforces the value of external support for planning, coordinating, and gaining the attention of decision-makers. Yet it also reveals the collective capacity of street-level practitioners to pursue many of these tasks on their own.

In early February of 2004, HUD submitted to Congress an unprecedented reduction in funding for federal housing vouchers and a radical revision of housing voucher policies as part of its annual budget proposal. The Flexible Voucher Program, as the proposal was called, sought to replace the federal Section 8 program with a block grant to local housing agencies with the aim of dismantling basic protections for low-income families that have under-girded the program for decades. The proposal called for reducing expenditures for vouchers in the 2005 fiscal year by one billion dollars below the 2004 level. According to Congressional Budget Office’s estimates, the reduction would amount to $4.6 billion less than that needed to maintain the existing level of services by 2009, a sum that supports approximately 600,000 vouchers or thirty percent of the vouchers in use at the time.
Among the targeted cuts was the entire budget for the FSS program. At $45-48,000 in each of the previous four years, the FSS program comprised less than half a percent of the entire federal outlay for the voucher program. In place of the mandatory program and accompanying budget line, the Flexible Voucher proposal introduced an “incentive bonus” for high performing programs that, among other yet to be clarified criteria, exceed a baseline “graduation rate” of participants who no longer utilize housing assistance. While the bonus would be designated for self-sufficiency and homeownership activities, including salary compensation for FSS coordinators or other staff, housing authorities would no longer be required to operate the program. Nor would HUD continue to cover the costs of the escrow accounts for all enrolled FSS participants. A Center on Budget and Policy Priorities report predicted that the reduced administrative fees for the Section 8 program and the unpredictability of bonus funds would dissuade many housing authorities from operating the program, particularly in absence of the obligation to do so. The report also argued that language buried in the revised contracts would open the possibility for housing authorities to redirect individual escrow accounts accumulated by FSS participants to cover other operating costs.

Both of the FSS practitioner discussion forums changed the agendas of their February 2004 meetings to discuss HUD’s budget proposal. Some of the practitioners in each of the forums had heard about the proposal from the Yahoo listserv, the CBPP housing and welfare list, or from others in their agencies who are involved in advocacy efforts with housing coalitions in their areas. They informed the rest of the group about the proposals and circulated copies of briefing papers and “calls to action” from the advocacy groups. In the discussions that ensued, the practitioners intimated that passage of the proposal in its entirety was unlikely, however they recognized that it was both a cause for concern and an opportunity to raise awareness of the FSS program and of the need to support low-income housing policy in general.

Supported Advocacy of the Nonprofit Forum: The nonprofit group devoted half an hour of their three-hour meeting to the topic. They agreed to supply clients’ success stories and numbers evidencing the program’s role in reducing welfare dependence, increasing earned income, accumulating assets, and helping participants become homeowners to the Rental Assistance directors in each of their agencies. The MNPHA directors would then incorporate their

\footnote{In the following month, the Welfare-To-Work Voucher Program was also dismantled.}

\footnote{United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Fiscal Year 2005 Budget Summary.” p. 16-17.}
contributions into the materials they were preparing for a series of meetings with legislators in Washington in the following month. The remainder of the forum’s discussion focused on one practitioner’s voter registration drive and the idea of empowering clients to become more engaged in the policy decisions that affect their lives.

**Autonomous Advocacy Efforts of the Public Forum:** The public housing group devoted considerably more time to discussing the proposal and its implications. In contrast to their nonprofit counterparts who enjoyed the security of DHCD’s commitment to the FSS program regardless of HUD’s funding allocation, public forum members perceived the proposal as a more serious threat to their programs and positions. Members raised concerns that their agencies were not likely to receive the proposed incentive bonuses because they do not operate homeownership programs. They expressed worries about their agencies’ lack of a steady income flow from other sources to make up for the loss of designated FSS funding and reduced administration fees. The practitioners also addressed the possibility that the HAs might continue to operate the program without designated coordinators and in so doing eliminate the critical value that case management provides. As one practitioner noted, “The bottom section (of participants) will lose out. We’ll end up only serving those who are able to do it themselves.”

Public forum members not only voiced these concerns; they brainstormed about ways they might raise funding for salaries from alternative sources. This focus was, in part, a product of necessity. Whereas DHCD applies for funding on behalf of all eight of the nonprofit programs and Rental Assistance directors negotiate their agency’s share of the distribution of the funds, the FSS practitioners in the public housing agencies are usually responsible for applying for the NOFA for their own salaries. The practitioners are clearly aware of the effort this independence demands of them as this excerpt from the meeting illustrates:

Sue L.: It makes me mad. We’ve not been given anything to run this program … We’ve made our own programs for nothing and now they are taking away our salaries.

Rebecca: We are self sufficient. If we don’t apply for our salaries we don’t get it.

In addition to discussing strategies each practitioner might pursue to replace HUD funding, the group also discussed how they might engage their agency directors to prevent passage of the proposal. One member of the group circulated a letter she prepared on behalf of her Executive Director and Board of Directors to which she attached letters from participants and service partners in her community. Several practitioners decided to prepare similar letters in their own agencies. However, others were reluctant to embrace this advocacy role. One practitioner
referred to a debate on the FSS Yahoo listserv about whether it is acceptable and even ethical to lobby for preservation of the program. Contributors to the listserv thread reached the conclusion that lobbying as an FSS coordinator was inappropriate but that voicing opinions through political channels as private citizens was legitimate. In contrast to this virtual community of practice, the members of the practitioner discussion forum concluded that there were no direct prohibitions to contacting representatives in the program regulations. The group agreed, however, that it was wise to find out how directors view advocacy before proceeding to represent themselves to legislators in their official capacity as FSS coordinators at a specific HA.

Similar to the impetus for the FSS Fleet Loan program, the practitioner discussion forum emerged as a vehicle for action to counter the constraints of individual practitioners. Some practitioners indicated that HA directors who are eager for increased flexibility and confident in the likelihood of receiving the incentive bonuses would actually support the HUD proposal. They raised the fact that many directors remain skeptical about FSS and "would love to see the program go." As one of the co-chairs indicated, "My new director loves the program. Even if it's cut, she'll find a way to fund it. But my former director didn't like the idea of someone jumping to a large escrow. He didn't like the idea of giving out a $30,000 check."

The group decided to appeal to national decision makers as a group both to circumvent their reluctant directors and to take advantage of the potential power of their united front. As one practitioner reflected:

Suzanne: I don't think (the proposal) will go through in its entirety but we need to not be complacent. I'm nervous. It's not so much about getting people into their first job anymore but to move them beyond that and upwards and helping people to accrue assets. The difference between the poor and rich is money. A lot of directors are ambivalent about FSS and have been since the beginning. It's important for the group to do something for the programs where the director is not speaking up for the program. It's important for Congress to get testimonials from the clients. We might also be surprised by what they think is the most successful. Other than that I can't deal with the enormity of that.

With this understanding, the group decided to prepare a letter on behalf of the practitioner discussion forum to be signed by each of them personally. The group also decided that their appeal should clarify their conception of self-sufficiency to counter the HUD's emphasis on terminating dependency on housing assistance and becoming homeowners.

Applying the lessons learned from the letter written collectively to apply for the NAHRO award for the FSS Fleet Loan Program, the group quickly adopted a division of labor for the preparations and a process for approving the final document. The practitioner who had written
the letter for her agency agreed to draft a letter to be reviewed by the group at an extra meeting scheduled for the following month. Each of the practitioners committed to send her their definitions of self-sufficiency and their arguments for why the FSS program warrants continued funding. At the March 29th meeting, the group reviewed the draft and discussed its content and style. Each practitioner who raised a stylistic comment or suggested a change in emphasis or clarification was asked to write the proposed changes and submit them to the three practitioners who volunteered to revise the draft. In recognition of the tight time line if the letter was to reach its target audience in time to influence decisions, the group authorized this writing team to complete the revisions according to the informal consensus of the day’s discussion. A signature sheet was circulated to be attached to the completed letter.

Preparation of the letter raised questions about the group’s identity that had not been addressed in previous collective efforts. In recognition of the expanded membership of the group since its inception, they agreed to change the name from the Greater Boston FSS Coordinator’s Group to the Massachusetts FSS Coordinators Group. Remembering the confusion and conflicts that emerged in claiming ownership of the NAHRO award, they also agreed that while designating one HA as the return address was a practical necessity, using that agency’s letterhead would mislead readers about the letter’s collective authorship. One of the practitioners designed stationery for the purpose that included the names of 41 housing authorities, all those who had ever attended the meeting in recent years. Others volunteered to contact FSS practitioners in the remaining HAs that had received HUD funding in the previous year, and to simultaneously invite them to join the group.

The new letterhead not only granted the forum symbolic autonomy from their individual housing agencies; it also afforded it standing as an entity with an identity independent of any particular member of the community. Practitioners who felt uncomfortable signing the letter would not need to do so, yet their agency’s membership in the group would still contribute to its strength as a statewide union of programs.

The practitioners decided that in addition to explaining the value of the FSS program, they also needed to provide evidence that it was actually helping clients. Like their counterparts in the nonprofit group, the practitioners decided to collect data on program sizes, increases in employment and earned income, escrow accumulation, home purchases, and other measures of program outcomes. Whereas the nonprofit practitioners simply transmitted their materials to the
contingent of MNPHA directors, the public forum compiled their own advocacy packet and devised a strategy for transmitting it to members of Congress and the administration.

A few days before their meeting, a fledgling initiative dedicated to building expanding awareness of FSS and developing and publicizing modes for partnerships with other agencies interested in asset-building and self-sufficiency efforts posted a template for gathering information about program outcomes on the FSS Yahoo listserv. The group members elected to use this template and later included the report compiled from the data in the advocacy packet. As testimony to the value of the regular, face-to-face meetings of the practitioner discussion forum, the Massachusetts contingent’s contributions comprised over two-thirds of the respondents to the nation-wide initiative.

While forum members recognized that legislators are accustomed to judging the merits of a program based on such quantitative outcome data, they also sought to include client testimonies and letters from social service partners in the packet. One practitioner volunteered to assemble the materials and produced a two-inch high report entitled “Beacons Lighting the Way to Success.” Each sub-section began with an excerpt from a client’s letter of support, a photograph of clients pursuing goal related activities, and a statement about each facet of the program.

The practitioners’ discussion about how to distribute the letter and packet to federal decision makers reveals both the strength of the collective and the limitations of street-level advocacy. The group sought advice from sympathetic agency directors, supervisors, and friends in the advocacy community to derive the list of recipients of the package. Each practitioner took responsibility for tailoring a package for one or two state congressional representatives, senators, members of the budget committees, and HUD officials. The group also used personal ties to carry their message about FSS across the federal silos to the secretary of Health and Human Services. One practitioner’s son, friendly with a high ranking HHS official, agreed to hand deliver the document to the secretary and assure that he read it. Another practitioner called her congressional representative’s office during the meeting to determine the projected dates for

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6 Jeff Lubell, former Deputy Director of Program Development and Research at HUD and previously a low-income housing advocate for the CBPP, founded FSS Partnerships with support of the Annie E. Casey foundation and LISC’s Housing Authority Resource Center one month prior to the HUD’s announcement of the proposal. The initiative aims to support FSS practitioners by sharing best practices and supporting entrepreneurial approaches to program growth, and to develop and publicize modes for partnerships between FSS programs and other agencies interested in asset-building and self-sufficiency efforts. The group had not been aware of the initiative or the data collection effort until I forwarded the information to the forum’s two co-chairs who then distributed it to the e-mail list.
budget hearings to guide their final stages of preparation. Ultimately, dozens of officials received the materials as a result of their collective efforts.

In sum, even without the help of external sponsors, the public forum adopted the advocacy strategies of their nonprofit peers to convey their appeal to preserve the FSS program to national decision makers. They formed task forces to assemble their advocacy documents and although their research was less systematic than the one the nonprofit forum pursued and abandoned, they compiled an impressive presentation of evidence of the program’s achievements that included the voices of their clients and partners in the field as well as administrative data and their own impressions. As they did with the appeal for childcare vouchers, the public forum used personal connections to transmit their message to decision-makers.

Perhaps most impressively, the forum formalized their identity as a cohesive group. They christened themselves with the new, more inclusive name. They created the letterhead as a vehicle for speaking in one voice and they used it to express the message they crafted together as a group.

**Limitations of Both Advocacy Efforts:** That both forums made concerted efforts to shape the national policy agenda concerning their programs suggests that street-level practitioners can indeed join forces to advocate for their clients and programs. Ultimately, however, it is unclear whether either forum’s advocacy efforts actually had an affect on policy decisions. Mitigating against the influence of their report were several factors beyond the control of the street-level advocates and their allies. For one, as practitioners operating exclusively in Massachusetts where state representatives were largely already committed to saving safety net programs, their voices had little influence over Republican vote shifters in Congress. The public forum entertained thoughts about involving FSS practitioners from other states in their campaign, yet decided against it given time constraints and communication challenges.

Secondly, as practitioners of a relatively small program, their voices were forced to compete with other low-income housing allies. The CBPP and NAHRO all made strong statements in support of the FSS program. However, with the entire federal voucher program at stake, the tiny FSS program was not at the forefront of their appeals. Third, the Flexible Voucher Program was soon overshadowed by the next emergency. On April 22nd of that year, HUD announced changes in funding calculations that would force some agencies to revoke commitments to subsidize hundreds of income eligible residents. The panic surrounding the potential loss of
vouchers roused clients and some landlords to join in the advocacy efforts, yet the appeal shifted again to broader housing policy rather than the FSS program itself.

5.4 Discussion of Findings about Forum Contributions to Creative Coordination

This examination of the FSS practitioner discussion forums suggests that joining with peers across the frontlines of the same programs facilitates members’ value-adding interactions with providers of other services and helps them influence policy and budget decisions. This finding counters the claim that street-level solidarity necessarily reinforces self-interested resistance to the pursuit of program objectives. To the contrary, the examples of collective effort reviewed in this section demonstrate the dedication of the community of practice to improving self-sufficiency practice and the FSS program. Indeed, the evidence from my observations of the two discussion forums suggests that these street-level practitioners come together to do more than consult with one another about whether they are exercising discretion appropriately. The forums are venues for learning the craft of creative street-level coordination, for exercising and developing leadership necessary for collective action, and for affirming and cultivating their identity as a community of self-sufficiency practitioners dedicated to improving programs for their clients.

Learning to Coordinate Creatively: The discussion forums facilitate learning in several ways. Members learn from one another’s experiences of creative street-level coordination. Although they operate in distinct service areas with different potential partners, the practitioners are sometimes able to adopt or adapt practices gleaned from their peers. However, the evidence reported here also suggests that these contextual differences constrain the capacity for learning from one another. They have yet to develop a repertoire of mechanisms for learning how to transform practices that work well in one context so that they work in different ones. The lapses in the groups’ collective memory contribute to the challenge of learning from one another’s experience.

These observations raise questions about the advantages of what Rebecca aptly called “the group’s self-sufficiency” in her characterization of their responsibility for designing their programs. Can expert facilitation help members of such communities of practice generalize about their creative coordination practices – articulate theories-in-use – so that they are more
easily adapted in other places? I return to this question in the concluding chapter of the dissertation.

Forum members also learn by doing, in the course of collaborating and advocating together. They explore models that have worked elsewhere. They combine their knowledge from experience and their knowledge about their clients with their partners’ expertise to develop new models, as the FSS-Fleet Loan demonstrates. The practitioners have also developed their capacity to work collectively by learning from their previous experiences of writing jointly produced documents and by applying skills in project design and management to pursue new ideas for collaboration.

Yet the comparison across the forums also suggests that the capacity to act collectively can atrophy without continual exercise. Although the nonprofit forum succeeded in organizing annual retreats for consecutive years, secured special childcare vouchers for their clients, and made headway towards completely a number of other joint projects, they have not repeated these efforts in recent years.

*Exercising and Developing Leadership for Collective Action:* The stories of the FSS-Fleet Loan program and the forums’ advocacy efforts suggest that frontline service workers have considerably greater capacity to persuade partners to join them in program improvement and to convince decision-makers to invest in their programs than they do when they operate as individuals. The strength of their collective client pool and their united voices afforded the leverage to engage with more influential partners and to gain the attention of decision-makers who have authority to change policies and allocate resources as well as the discretion to pursue smaller adjustments to routine procedures.

Together, the practitioners also succeeded in assembling evidence of program achievements in the absence of a professional, external evaluation. The reports and advocacy packages of administrative data and anecdotal evidence each forum assembled aimed to frame the program and their appeals for support in a way that resonated with their audience’s mission and values. Although the nonprofit group did not complete the analysis of the data they collected for their formal evaluation, their initial efforts to substantiate the value of their programs illustrate their willingness to engage in self-examination as an instrument for securing additional program resources. These examples thus present a more powerful street-level leadership than the
accounts of situational discretion of Vinzant and Crothers’ “street-level leadership” discussed in Chapter 1.

The accounts of these collective endeavors also evidence how the practitioners have developed leadership skills of setting new directions, creating and maintaining their commitment to pursuing them, and adapting to emergent challenges (Drath 2001:18-21). By working together in the smaller sub-groups outside of the regular forum meetings, the practitioners devised more specific directions for their joint ventures and advocacy campaigns. These task-oriented teams helped to foster the entire group’s commitment to proposed projects and advocacy campaigns through seeking their feedback and convincing them about the merits of particular decisions. Fleet’s reliance on the practitioners to persuade their counterparts in other states to adopt the loan program is testimony to this proficiency.

Each of the advocacy efforts of both forums exemplifies proactive responses to emergent challenges. The threat of the Flexible Voucher proposal prompted the practitioners to deliberate together about their definition of self-sufficiency and, especially in the case of the public group, to articulate their commitment to the broader goals of helping their clients achieve economic independence than are reflected in HUD’s criteria for funding. The loan team members also exhibited the ability to adapt to changes in their negotiations around the post-pilot phase of the project. They applied what they learned from what was not working well and their newly acquired knowledge of lending practices to interpret the implications of the increase in the prime rate to persuade their partners to revise their proposed changes. They also convinced the forum members that the changes were necessary.

However, some external events posed insurmountable challenges. The practitioners felt they did not have the capacity to lobby the state for more resources in the context of a budget crisis. The fact that many Massachusetts congressional representatives were already supportive of affordable housing policies and the convictions of state officials to work-first approaches to welfare reform constrained the impact of their advocacy efforts. The bank merger eroded their personal connections and the recognized success of the loan program was not sufficient to convince Bank of America to alter its CRA approach. The community of practice has leadership potential, yet its power is not sufficient to compete with all external forces.

The contrast between the two forums points to both advantages and disadvantages of support from external sponsors for developing the capacity for collective action. On the one hand, the
nonprofit forum’s connections with MNPHA directors and DHCD officials helped them organize their advocacy appeals and gain the attention of level state and national decision-makers. The personal connections of members of the public forum were less comprehensive and sustainable.

On the other hand, the public forum succeeded in establishing collaborative projects and pursuing advocacy campaigns without external guidance and support. The fact that the nonprofit forum gradually abandoned the practice of working sub-groups appears to account for the decline of collective action efforts since their more active early history of the designated childcare vouchers, annual FSS retreat, and attempts to produce the video, convene the conference on welfare reform, and establish the state-wide PCC. Indeed, in the period the research for this chapter addresses, the nonprofit forum did not specify plans for new collective projects in its annual statement of goals to the Rental Assistance Committee. The public forum’s autonomy thus seems to afford the members greater leeway to take responsibility for their own direction setting, to maintain commitment of fellow members, and to adapt proactively to external threats.

**Affirming and Cultivating the Identity of the Community of Self-Sufficiency**

Practitioners: The accounts of the practitioners’ collective efforts to collaborate and advocate illuminate how the discussion forums cultivate and reinforce the members’ identification with the community of practice and the identity of the community itself.

Whereas membership in the nonprofit forum is confined to the FSS practitioners who work in the eight agencies affiliated with the MNPHA, the Massachusetts FSS Coordinators Group has defined its own criteria for membership. Initially, membership was fluid and informal. Any FSS practitioner was welcome to attend, regardless of the location of their agency or its public or nonprofit status and attendance fluctuated as new practitioners joined and others stopped attending due to other work obligations or job changes. Questions about membership arose in the course of carrying out the loan program and advocacy agenda as the group came to recognize the value of economies of scale for joint projects and the power of their united voices for appealing to decision-makers.

Interestingly, although public forum members had established connections with their counterparts in other states as a result of the Fleet loan, participation in the aforementioned Yahoo FSS listserv, and attendance at the national NAHRO award ceremony and other conferences, the group decided against reaching beyond their Massachusetts colleagues for their
advocacy campaign. This decision implies that membership in the community of practice depends on regular attendance and participation in the meetings. This condition for membership is reflected in the group’s initial reluctance to include the nonprofit practitioners in the loan program. Yet inclusion also seems to reinforce participation. While the practitioners from the nonprofit agency based in Springfield had not attended the public forum’s meetings prior to the launch of the loan program, they soon became active contributors. One helped produce the Spanish translation of the loan training video and another initiated and helped to organize the certified training programs in financial counseling. In fact, despite the distance from the core membership’s base in the eastern part of the state, these newcomers hosted some of the subsequent meetings.

The efforts to pursue the joint projects also reinforced the identity of the community of practice as a cohesive group. The application for and receipt of the NAHRO award and the ensuing struggles over recognition required the group to present themselves as group to external audiences. In designing the letterhead for the advocacy appeal and changing the name of the group, the forum members proactively claimed group identity. The production of the promotional brochure took identity claiming a step further; it included a mission statement and explanation of the nature of the group and its accomplishments to potential external partners.

These efforts also evidence how identifying themselves as members of the group came to shape the practitioners’ conception of how it is feasible for them contribute to program improvement. Members of the loan team acted on behalf of the group even when they did not expect many of their own clients to benefit directly. The adoption of the letterhead afforded some members a means to protest policy changes they did not feel they could voice independently. And several practitioners, particularly those more actively involved in the development of the loan program, expressed that they felt empowered to continue to improve their programs and develop their capacity to do more. In sum, these findings suggest that participation in discussion forums expands the capacity of street-level practitioners to join other actors in the system of governance in contributing to the work of improving programs.

5.5 Conclusion

The concerted and directed efforts of members of the practitioner discussion forums enabled them to achieve more through their collaborative projects and appeals to decision makers than
they could achieve on their own. They occasioned learning from one another and with one another to enhance their capacity for creative coordination. And the group grew stronger as a result of their joint efforts. As I noted at the end of the previous chapter, however, these street-level efforts are not enough to solve the limitations of the self-sufficiency program designs and overcome all of the obstacles to their implementation in an environment of scarce resources and disparate interests. Even as a united group, the practitioners could not counter the effects of corporate mergers, congressional politics, or state budget deficits. Nor did they have the tools to apply all of the lessons they might have learned from their peers in the varied contexts of their diverse work environments. Although the forums occasioned recognition of members’ creative endeavors, gaining external recognition for the group’s efforts proved challenging.

What is clear from these findings is that the potential of such forums is worth the effort of further exploration.
CHAPTER 6
Sustaining Clients’ Motivation with Group Activities: Street-Level Sensemaking about Evolving Practices

Motivation is at the core of the FSS and JOBLink program designs. It is the problem the programs seek to address: the assumption that welfare assistance reduces recipients’ motivation to work. It is a key program goal: to motivate clients to seek and maintain employment that will earn them economic independence. And motivating clients to work is the chief program technology instead of job creation or workforce development. But the FSS and JOBLink program designs are based on a limited theory of what motivates people and keeps them motivated.

These final two chapters of Part II examine how the self-sufficiency practitioners employ the strategies of bricolage and sensemaking to address these limitations. The practitioners reinterpreted program goals and changed program technologies to help their clients meet expectations that are simultaneously more comprehensive and more feasible. Their creative practices enacted their more robust theories-in-use about how to motivate their clients to strive for economic independence.

6.1 Creating Feasible Expectations and Making New Sense of Client Motivation

The creative practices members of the nonprofit FSS forum supplemented the program design’s individual case management with activities for groups of clients. The aim was to boost clients’ sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy as key pre-requisites to self-sufficiency. JOBLink practitioners faced a far wider gap between the program designs and their emergent understanding of what works to motivate clients to make the transition from welfare to work. The creative practices that JOBLink forum members adopted deviated from the program design’s exclusive reliance on incentives and sanctions. The practitioners’ successive departures from the official regulations sought to discern clients’ efforts to meet the work requirements in addition to their achievements. They established new procedures for setting specific goals for individual clients that would be more feasible for them to accomplish and they created new mechanisms for giving clients constructive feedback on how to reach these goals. In the final stages of program implementation, the JOBLink practitioners redesigned program regulations to afford clients the opportunity to pursue more intensive education and training and attend to personal and family
needs in addition to satisfying the strict work requirements. This package of regulatory changes and new organizing structures -- known as the “Good Faith Effort Policy” -- was the product of the practitioners’ previously adopted and proposed creative practices.

My primary objective in both of these chapters is to elucidate how the members of the practitioner discussion forums employ the strategies of bricolage and sensemaking to design, legitimate, and carry out their creative alternatives to established ways of working. As explicated in Chapter 1, bricolage is the craft recombining resources at hand for new purposes (Levi-Strauss 1966; Baker and Nelson 2005; Freeman 2007; Balchin 1998). The resources available to the self-sufficiency practitioners – who lack discretion funds or the authority to acquire them from other sources – include their clients, the partners in the service delivery system, and sometimes computer technologies or physical space. But the most prevalent resources are the administrative regulations, procedures, and structures that shape activity in their housing agencies and other public serving bureaucracies. Such routines are particularly plentiful in the context of JOBLink practice where the program designs are more regulatory than in the flexible FSS program.

Sensemaking is the process of talking about a situation so as to shape understanding and influence action (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Weick 1995; Weick et al 2005). I examine how the practitioners make sense of emergent and persistent problems with the practice of motivating clients. And I look at how they persuade themselves and others that their new ideas make sense in terms of familiar ways of working. To analyze the practitioners’ sensemaking efforts, I draw on Sally Maitlis’ (2005) recent framework that identifies distinct forms of organizational sensemaking characterized according to particular processes of interaction and the nature of the accounts and actions generated. I adapt her framework that emphasizes the interactions between leaders and followers (or stakeholders) to the fit the context of the community of practice where members are, in many respects, their own leaders and in other respects, beholden to external decision makers, along the hierarchy of the housing agencies, the state Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) and HUD. I also reference the influence of and the influence on additional actors in the system of governance.

The practitioners’ responses to the challenge of motivating clients is particularly conducive to this study of sensemaking because forum discussions about the practice problems and creative practices often involved intense interactions that extended over months and years of meetings.
The structure of the discussion forums and their customs of deliberation also means that all of the sensemaking efforts I examine were organized and systematic, with attendance restricted to forum members and their Rental Assistance Committee (RAC) appointed Chairs (and, in the JOBLink forum, sometimes the DHCD liaison), regularly scheduled meetings, and at least loosely set agendas. Such “animated” and “controlled” interactions are the process characteristics Maitlis associates with the most dynamic and productive sensemaking efforts, both in terms of the explanations or accounts that deepen understanding and the influence on the actions of all actors involved.

This framework is useful for assessing the extent to which the self-sufficiency practitioners engage in sensemaking and examining how the program designs, implementation context, and relationships with decision-makers affect their sensemaking efforts. It also helps illuminate the differences in sensemaking between the FSS and JOBLink forums. Whereas the FSS forums were largely self-controlled and discussions were self-facilitated, agency officials and DHCD decision-makers exerted more control over JOBLink practice and their liaisons offered more support to facilitate forum discussions.

I also examine the forum members’ capacity to construct and articulate persuasive accounts of self-sufficiency practice and the implementation environment -- or their “discursive ability” -- and the how they perceive their “bounded responsibility” to address practice problems (Maitlis and Lawrence 2007). These enabling conditions for sensemaking directly point to my core research questions about street-level practitioners’ capacity to discern appropriate responses to dilemmas of practice and to assume responsibility for improving program operations.

In the pages that follow, I construct accounts of the practitioners’ discussions about the group activities in FSS and the departures from official JOBLink regulations leading to the “Good Faith Effort Policy” that extend over the entire life cycle of the creative practices. This extended temporal perspective allows me to examine how the practitioners used these strategies to generate, legitimate, and carry out their creative practices and how they expanded, refined, and sometimes abandoned them over time. I follow the development of their understanding of the practice problems and their emergent theories-in-use. And I analyze how the practitioners responded to the demands of different phases of program implementation, the economic and policy environment, and evidence of what is working in practice in the course of their efforts.
This chapter tells two related stories about motivating FSS clients – the evolution of individual forum members’ practice of convening peer support groups and the parallel practice of the cross-agency annual FSS retreat. I discuss implications for the feasibility of street-level bricolage and sensemaking after each account. The following chapter (Chapter 7) describes and analyzes the history of the JOBLink forum’s efforts to change the eligibility and compliance oriented program design into one that is more in line with the people transforming one of FSS. I conclude Chapter 7 with a comparative analysis of FSS and JOBLink practitioners’ efforts to improve how they keep their clients motivated.

6.2 The Evolution of the Group Approach to Sustaining Clients’ Motivation Among Individual Practitioners

This section tells the story of the evolution of the practices members of the nonprofit FSS practitioners’ forum developed to sustain clients’ motivation to pursue their self-sufficiency goals by creating opportunities for them to gather to address their shared concerns and common challenges collectively. This group-oriented approach to self-sufficiency practice was a marked departure from the program design’s exclusive focus on individual clients and, occasionally, their families. In contrast to the case management focus on interactions between practitioners and each individual client, the aim of the group activities was to allow clients to interact with one another to share information about resources, recount experiences of frustrations and triumphs, and encourage one another to keep up the effort in the face of obstacles. The group approach also afforded economies of scale conducive to programming for skill-developing workshops and other special events that are not feasible to offer on an individual basis.

As the following narrative will evidence, the practitioners’ saw the informal peer-to-peer learning and skills-building workshops as means to offer clients constructive feedback on their efforts to meet program expectations, to develop their capacity to do so, and to celebrate their efforts and incremental achievements as a means to enhance their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. According to this theory of motivation, the addition of group activities to the FSS technology of one-on-one case management thus fits the definition of creative street-level practice: they are value-adding departures from established procedures. Yet, over the years of FSS practice, forum members’ experience with group activities gradually altered their assessment of this value and their subsequent adjustments to previously established practices.
My account follows the forum members’ efforts to make sense of their creative practice from the initial diffusion of the practice through their acknowledgment of declining participation rates and I examine how deliberation in the meetings influenced members’ responses to this emerging understanding. In the second half of this section, I trace the parallel evolution of the forum’s Annual FSS Retreat – the cross-agency version of the group activities. I close with a discussion that summarizes key findings about the dynamics creative street-level practice, the characterization of sensemaking when practitioners have the flexibility for independent interpretations of appropriate practice, and the tension between autonomy from and dependency on external actors in engaging in forum-initiated collective activities.

The Diffusion of Group Activities in the Repertoire of the Forum’s Creative Practices:

The practice of convening peer support groups was among the first of the creative practices shared in the nonprofit FSS forum once participant enrollment was no longer the central focus. Minutes of the first year and a half of meetings reveal that each of the forum members eventually established the practice. Reflecting on those early peer support group meetings, forum members told me what they thought the clients gained that they did not receive from the individualized case management. They explained that the clients often informed one another about resources available in the community that had not previously been among those in the practitioners’ service network. They also recalled that clients shared their stories about juggling childcare responsibilities with work and studies and other coping strategies for managing the strains of pursuing their self-sufficiency goals. The practitioners also emphasized that the peer groups fostered a sense of camaraderie and group identity for participants who often feel isolated in their efforts to make fundamental life changes. The following quote conveys the practitioners’ observations that this mutual support helps to cultivate participants’ belief in their capacity to succeed:

A lot of these families don't have any kind of supports at all. You've got a lot of people coming from drug backgrounds, substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse. I mean, they can't go to their families, because of all the issues that they've had to overcome related to the families. And in many cases, you're ending three or four generations of welfare and poverty. Some of our folks are the first ones that ever went to a college, in their families. And (they) overcame those obstacles of the family saying, "You'll never make it, you can't do it." But somehow they ... got the motivation to do that. And the support groups were helpful in that. ... That was kind of the idea: building camaraderie. (From an interview at SMOC, February 18, 2002).
Many forum members supplemented the informal peer-to-peer interactions with additional programming by inviting additional system actors to support group meetings. The workshops described in the previous chapter on creative street-level coordination afforded participants opportunities to learn from experts in career development, financial management, parenting, and other relevant fields in addition to one another. Practitioners invited family members, housing agency staff and directors, and in some cases, community leaders and state legislators to join the clients in celebrating their achievements. Eventually, these “Recognition Dinners” – as several of the practitioners’ termed the ceremonies – included distribution of awards to program graduates. Yet, in keeping with the idea of acknowledging clients’ efforts as well as their accomplishments, the events continued to acknowledge participants’ interim achievements as well as program completion.

Other elements added to the routine included trips for families to amusement parks and theatrical performances funded by local foundations or business associations that aimed to foster a sense of community among program participants and their families while recognizing the need for restorative recreation in addition to information sharing and skills development. Janine’s participant-led revolving loan fund described in the previous chapter was another of these extensions to the peer support group model that not only introduced new resources in form of the emergency loans but also gave participants hands on experience in planning and coordinating events and the chance to show their children and family members the fruits of their efforts.

The peer support groups were thus the product of bricolage; the practitioners crafted them from applying available resources towards new uses. The workshops, recognition events, and outings drew from service partners’ services and expertise, funding, and status. Yet the clients’ knowledge and commitment were the primary resources. The peer support groups consolidated factual knowledge – or knowing about available resources – and practical knowledge – or knowing how to overcome challenges for subsequent use of the participants. The ongoing interactions in the groups also cultivated relational knowledge among participants: knowing who you are in relation to others and who others are and how to help satisfy their needs.

The practitioners also emphasized that this knowledge informed their ongoing case management efforts in guiding individual clients and in convincing potential partners of the value to be gained from adjusting their service routines. They stressed that the informal interactions with clients allowed them to establish relationships built on deeper and more
personal understanding than the compliance orientation of their state-agent roles or the service-orientation of their client-agent roles. As Ruth’s comments about her combined economic literacy and peer support group reflect, these relationships formed the basis for greater rapport and trust for other case management efforts.

The Economic Literacy program is the best way to get to know people. There are six classes in the series. Then they call to chat. It makes it so much easier. The ones that have not attended are more difficult. ... I’m starting to get a real good group. It’s a program that requires their input and their work. I can’t do it for them.

The practice of convening the groups may also have resonated for the practitioners because of the similarity to familiar structures for interacting with other actors in the system of governance. As discussed in the previous chapter, many of the FSS practitioners had experienced the benefits of bringing together diverse members of Program Coordinating Committees (PCCs) and similar inter-agency service forums who, at least ostensibly, share a common interest in providing services to community residents. Perhaps more significantly, the peer support groups resemble the practitioner discussion forum itself. Both are venues for people with common interests to learn together and support one another’s efforts to overcome challenges and to sustain one another’s sense of individual and collective efficacy and commitment to the hard work the self-sufficiency paradigm entails.

I did not hear the practitioners articulate these parallels. Yet the practice of convening otherwise disparate actors was clearly among the practitioners’ repertoire of routines and the prospects for learning and encouragement within communities of practice were consistent with forum members’ mental models (Senge 1994). This familiarity may be among the reasons for the diffusion of the peer support groups, supplementary workshops, and events across the community of FSS practitioners. The particular nature of the groups and their activities varied across the nonprofit agencies according to the practitioners’ interests and priorities and the degree to which they were able to garner cooperation from partners and agency directors. Yet the endorsement of the group approach became an established component of FSS practice among forum members.

Making Sense of the Problem of Low Attendance:

By August of 2000, several years after the peer support groups had become common practice throughout the community of FSS practitioners, dwindling attendance led forum members to question the effectiveness of this element of the their repertoire of motivational
devices. They offered several explanations for the lower levels of participation. One explanation was the erosion of enthusiasm over time. As Jenn conjectured:

I think, historically, when FSS first started, my understanding was that people came to the peer group meetings. It was a new and exciting program and people came and they learned from each other. Like we have written testimony from people who got a lot out of the meetings. And we can't get that again. I don't know what it is. Now, it's not new and exciting anymore. It's just another thing that we can give them (in addition to) this money and this program. And so now it's not anything exciting.

Another explanation attributed the decline to changes in the policy context since the initial meetings. The peer groups were established at the same time welfare reform was becoming a reality in Massachusetts. Like the early PCC meetings, the peer support groups allowed participants to help one another comprehend the new expectations and find ways to meet them. By 2000, however, the new welfare rules had become common knowledge and resources were dwindling. Thus the practitioners conjectured that the knowledge gained from members of the peer support groups had become less essential.

Others elaborated that the first cohorts of FSS participants had already graduated and they now needed to establish relationships with new participants to fortify the groups. As one practitioner clarified, devoting time to forging those relationships was more difficult than it was at the beginning when caseloads were still low and the most motivated first cohort participants constituted the majority of those enrolled in the program. The consensus in the group was that clients who were motivated to work primarily because of the mandatory work requirements associated with income supports rather than a personal commitment to self-sufficiency goals had come to comprise a higher concentration of the clientele than in the past.

They also remarked that the work obligations had exacerbated the time constraints that made participating in the group events challenging. As one practitioner explained:

Before, they weren't being forced to work. If they were working, it was like a part-time thing, and they had the other resources in place. Now, you know, they're probably just exhausted. I mean, think about that: if you're a mom with two kids, by yourself, with nobody else (to help). You've got to get up first thing in the morning, get the kids up, get them dressed, get them out, get them breakfast and all that, and then get them to, God knows, child care, transportation and all that stuff. And then you go through the same thing at the end of the day, and then get home, get the kids fed, clothed and all that. I mean, there's nothing left. And if there is, I don't think they want to come out to go to a meeting. [Laughter.]
The laughter about the burden of attending meetings resonated not only because the many of the forum members had just experienced the strains of long distance travel under morning traffic rush hour conditions to participate in the forum; many had also experienced the hardships of balancing full-time work with the responsibilities of single parenthood. Others emphasized cultural differences as an explanation for the disinclination to join the groups; they attributed the lack of appreciation of the value of meeting with others to the observation that few clients had grown up attending Girl Scouts or 4H meetings. Another suggestion was that “it’s the fear of sounding stupid, of doing something new.”

Forum members did not seek agreement about which of these explanations was the most plausible. Nor did they strive to synthesize the explanations to construct a single causal account. Nevertheless, two themes united their sensemaking efforts. None attributed all of the blame for low attendance to the clients and all recognized a flaw in their current theory-in-use: “Only the highly motivated show up. (Those who) really need help in gaining motivation and self-esteem don’t.”

**Creative Responses to the Practice Problem of Low Attendance:**

Forum members added a number of practices to the collective repertoire to address the challenge of low attendance at group activities by using available resources to entice participation and make it easier for clients to attend. Practitioners included food and held raffles to make the meetings and events more attractive. They also offered childcare, held the meetings at various times including evenings and weekends to appeal to working parents, and convened the meetings in various locations in order to reduce the transportation burden of participation. Yet some practitioners found that they were unable to implement these practices. Insurance policies in some of the agencies prevented the practitioners from providing childcare on the premises. Some found that new times and locations actually reduced attendance as previously regular participants stopped attending and new members failed to make up the difference. None of them found these adjustments to be sufficient to raise participation to the original levels. The modifications addressed some of the pragmatic constraints to attendance, yet the incentives to attend proved inadequate to motivate clients to attend on a regular basis, even when they expressed appreciation for the opportunity to interact with their peers.

By the spring of 2001, several forum discussions were devoted to deliberating about three alternative practices members had devised to address low attendance in the peer support groups.
meetings. Some practitioners made participation in the peer groups a program requirement. In contrast to this contractual approach, others shifted from the peer support model of engaging with groups of clients to one based exclusively on skills building workshops marketed to participants as single, one-time events rather than ongoing commitments to a group. Others abandoned the group approach altogether and incorporated structures for skills-building into their one-on-one case management practice.

Forum member's discussion of their colleagues' practices illuminates the sensemaking techniques they employed to justify their adaptations of the original model. As in the discussion of the reasons for declining participation, they did not strive to develop a standard practice across forum members or to reach a formally declared consensus about the legitimacy of these alterations. Rather, forum members listened appreciatively and responded in terms of their impressions about the feasibility of adopting such approaches in their own agencies and service environments.

Requiring Participation: In the March 2001 forum meeting, Janine explained her rationale for mandating participation in the peer support groups. Although she used the new paternalist terminology of a mandate, language that resonates with the program design's formal contract of participation, Janine's account emphasizes her use of the persuasive techniques of sensegiving rather than the coercive techniques of program requirements.

We made a change in the requirements for peer group meetings. Instead of having them monthly, we're saying that they must come to at least three a year. Now we have quarterly meetings at multiple locations. It's working. I wrote a stem newsletter. One traveled all the way from Duxbury through a storm to come. I tell them, "It's an important part of the program. We put a lot of effort in them and it's for your benefit." ... It pulls the group together. We have an ice breaker where we introduce one another and do a hands-on game. It's about sharing in a group. The feedback was that it was a good meeting. It is working. I tell them that I know it's a challenge. But I had to think of my responsibility for getting people there. I say I understand the difficulty. I was a single parent. What's realistic? Once every three or four months is realistic.

Janine's remarks evidence the use of sensegiving strategies for convincing two audiences of the value of this change: the clients and her fellow forum members. She used the communication vehicles of her FSS newsletter and informal conversations to inform clients of the requirement and to convey its centrality to the program. On a more emotional level, she referenced her personal experience to establish her appreciation of the difficulty of participation.
and appealing to what sounds like an invocation of guilt, she emphasized the hard work exerted for the clients' benefit. Modeling this appeal to the clients is one means of persuading her colleagues that the requirement is realistic and feasible along with the example of the client who made the effort to attend despite extenuating circumstances. Finally, her emphasis on her "responsibility for getting people there" parallels the appeal to clients' sense of obligation and her recognition of her colleague's commitment to serving clients.

Although Janine's remarks clearly aimed to persuade others of the virtues of required participation in the peer support groups, she made no attempt to convince her colleagues to adopt this practice for their clients. The one other forum member who required participation reinforced Janine's assessment of the value of mandate, yet similarly did not actively advocate for others to follow suit. Another recounted that she had recently discovered that one of her predecessors had formally included the requirement to attend monthly support group meetings in the contract of participation in the program in the early phases of FSS implementation. The obligation was later reduced to mandatory bi-monthly attendance, yet to her knowledge, the obligation was never enforced. Others indicated that they had considered mandating participation before deciding to abandon the regular support group meetings altogether. Concerns that "legal services would be all over us" made them wary of introducing a new requirement when so many participants were already several years into their signed contracts.

Introducing Structure and Expertise: The majority of forum members elected to discontinue the regular peer support meetings rather than mandate participation or continue to convene them with limited participation. Instead, they invested more energy in holding intermittent celebratory events and short workshop series for ad hoc groups of clients. These practitioners justified this departure from what had become established practice among forum members with reference to other aspects of their theory-in-use of motivation. The workshops gave the sessions a more targeted or focused objective of developing particular skills than the broader and longer-term goals of enhancing participants' sense of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and belonging. Participants would thus be able to choose whether the topic to be covered was a priority for them in deciding to attend just as they decided whether to pursue a particular training program and access a supportive service. To ensure that the choice of workshops reflected participants' specific learning goals and to schedule them at convenient times and locations, some practitioners surveyed the FSS clientele. In keeping with the previous commitment to peer learning, the
questionnaire that circulated among the practitioners also solicited ideas for self-led workshops to allow clients to share skills they had acquired with their colleagues.

The rationale for substituting workshops for ongoing support groups also emphasized that the workshops on topics such as financial management, home purchase preparation, and better parenting not only afforded clients opportunities to acquire information and learn key skills. They also allowed participants to more clearly envision themselves succeeding in efforts to amass savings, become homeowners, or being more engaged in their children’s development.

Despite these efforts, participation was still lower than initially anticipated. Practitioners would send invitations out to the entire FSS and JOBLink clientele and receive RSVPs from only a small fraction. Of these, only about half would actually show up on the date of the event. Reports to the forum about these events typically referenced attendance of eight or ten participants as “good turn out” regardless of the number of invitations sent out. The event, rather than the clientele, had become the reference point for evaluation. The workshops were still seen as valued additions to one-on-one case management. Yet for many of the practitioners, group events were no longer a strategy for reaching the least motivated. Rather, they served a sub-set of the clientele who were already motivated enough to pursue a possible learning opportunity when it fit their particular interests.

These rationales for the switch from regular peer support group meetings to the occasional workshops could be construed as the resort to the coping mechanisms of directed scarce resources to those easiest to serve or limiting practice to the less complex, more routinized tasks. Despite Janine’s comment on her sense of responsibility to convene the groups, members of the community of practice did not criticize those who made the switch to workshops. Nor did they judge those who determined that low attendance at the workshops was insufficient justification for the time and effort invested. Rather, forum members validated individual members’ decisions to divert those resources to other efforts to better serve their clients. Those who elected to abandon this aspect of the community’s repertoire of good self-sufficiency practice did so because they no longer believed in the balance of costs and benefits, not to avoid the extra work. For them, what was once regarded as a creative practice had become an experiment that failed to work in the current operating conditions.
Street-Level Sensemaking and the Evolution of the Creative Practice of Group Activities

Valuable Additions to Ongoing FSS Practice: Both the peer support groups and the more structured, skills-building workshops fit the definition of creative street-level practice. They constituted additions to the one-on-one orientation of the program design that, in the practitioners’ assessments, improved participants’ capacity to meet their self-sufficiency goals. Moreover, both group activities were ongoing practices that were targeted to all program participants as opposed to situational adjustments for specific clients. Although the workshops were discrete events, they entered the community of practice’s repertoire of routines that were repeated periodically, if more sporadically, than the peer support groups.

Like the program adjustments Cooney observed in her study of the implementation of a welfare-to-work program, the group activities were the product of the practitioners’ reinterpretation of the official goals and technologies of intervention. Cooney’s examples involved the expansion of the program’s work-first approach to include pre- and post-employment opportunities. Similarly, both types of group activities involved a broader theory of motivation than that underlying the FSS design. While the official FSS designs already embraced the importance of helping clients access supportive services and employment oriented education, the peer support groups and workshops expanded the scope of those technologies by creating additional mechanisms to learn about available services and new opportunities to develop life skills as well as employment related capabilities. In addition, the practitioners viewed participation in peer support groups as a means to cultivate participants’ sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. According to the practitioners’ theory-in-use implicit in their discussions of these activities, this shift in clients’ self-perception is critical to sustaining their motivation to keep up the effort to achieve economic independence in the face of practical obstacles, others’ pessimism, and their own doubts about their abilities and perseverance.

In fact, the addition of group activities to FSS practice evidences even greater capacity for creative street-level practice than Cooney’s examples of programmatic adjustments. Whereas supervisors and previously established contracts with business leaders were instrumental to carrying out the innovations Cooney describes, the FSS practitioners introduced the group activities on their own. The fact that the frontline FSS staff succeed in expanding the program design is especially noteworthy given their lack of discretionary funding or mandated partnerships. Instead, the primary resources available for creative street-level practice were the
clients' and practitioners' knowledge from experience, time, effort, and enthusiasm and the practitioners' relatively wide discretion to deviate from official directives. These were the same resources (or "latent potential") that actors from different service agencies brought to the more effective PCCs and they were the same resources that members of the community of FSS practitioners brought to the discussion forums. Each of these gatherings aimed to develop participants' capabilities to engage in self-sufficiency work by affording those who share a common purpose an opportunity to come together to create coherence, further understanding, and develop knowledge in response to a confusing policy and program regulations, emergent challenges, and uncertain technologies for making the transition from welfare to work.

This parallelism among organizing structures where members of communities of practice deliberate together was not discussed in the forum meetings. As the value of convening clients — whether to learn from one another or to learn together from external experts — was not contested, the practitioners did not need to justify the additions to established practice. Therefore, if the recombination of routines from the existing repertoire of practices exemplifies bricolage, it is a tacit and spontaneous version of the strategy.

*Dynamics of Street-Level Creativity*: The example of the peer support groups substantiates the argument that frontline workers who lack formal authority, recognized expertise, and externally sponsored performance incentives nevertheless have power, capacity, and commitment to improve program operations. The story of the evolution of the practice of group activities also says something more nuanced about street-level practitioners' capacity to respond responsibly to emergent developments. The addition of the workshops to the peer support group meetings began as a means to supplement the clients' knowledge from experience with external expertise; the practitioners sought relevant speakers to respond to the expressed and perceived gaps in the clients' knowledge about resources and skills for advancing their self-sufficiency goals. Subsequent adjustments to the peer support groups were all responses to evidence that their initial creative practice was not longer working as intended. This modification of the practitioners' creative practice points to a different sort of responsiveness that resembles coping in some respects and strategic assessment of feasible responsibility in others. Their response was not passive acquiescence to limitations, but rather the product of reflection on options.

Forum members did not consider the shift to workshops as an improvement to practice. On the contrary, even those who chose to abandon the peer support groups continued to embrace the
theory that fostering camaraderie among program participants and building their sense of self-worth was an important facet of self-sufficiency work. In this sense, the discontinuation of the peer support groups could be seen as a resort to coping mechanisms. The workshops simplified the more complex interactions of the peer groups and targeted a smaller group of clients who were more inclined to participate. Although the practitioners did not blame the clients for not participating, forum discussions reveal that some of the practitioners attributed the lack of appreciation for the value of the group activities to the cultural milieu in which the clients were immersed.

However, the demise of the peer support groups is also distinct from coping in several respects. The practitioners who abandoned support groups continued to offer the case management prescribed in the program designs. In fact, at least one practitioner intensified her one-on-one work with the clients after discontinuing the additional group practices. More significantly, the decision was based on the practitioners’ assessment that the practice was no longer feasible in the aftermath of welfare reform. Feasibility trumped value in their final assessment about the appropriateness of continuing to convene the groups.

This rationalization of the change in valued practice reinforces the argument against the implication of classical theories that street-level workers’ responses to practice problems are either inherently self-serving or inherently passive. Like recent investigations of self-sufficiency program implementation that call attention to frontline workers’ capacity for strategic action (Sandfort 2003, etc; Cooney 2007), my findings suggest that the practitioners responded strategically to the inadequacies of the FSS program designs. However they did not merely react submissively to the circumstances that rendered their creative additions to those designs impracticable. Rather, the practitioners actively reconstituted the group activities by drawing upon existing routines and schema. The workshops were already established in the repertoire of FSS practices and their value was consistent with the practitioners’ collective understanding that skills-building is vital to sustaining clients’ efforts to succeed. The transition from the more robust peer support groups to the less valued workshop form thus exemplifies what Cooney terms “pragmatic acceptance” instead of either passive resignation or self-serving resistance.

This examination of the evolution of the group activities over an extended period of time thus points to two characteristics of the practice of street-level creativity. The assessment of the value of departures from established practice is a continual process that is contingent not only on
the perspectives of the community of practice; it also depends on developments in the environment and emergent evidence of what works. Even when practitioners are motivated to improve programs, there are limits to what their knowledge from practice can achieve. Creative practice thus also entails discerning when it is more appropriate to direct energy to alternative pursuits.

The Discussion Forum as a Venue for Fostering and Illuminating Effort: These findings further substantiate claims about street-level agency and their capacity to apply knowledge of work routines to justify departures from established procedures. The vantage point of the practitioner discussion forum also afforded insights into street-level capacity that previous studies did not observe. The discussions shed light on how the practitioners engaged in the third task of the work of governance – developing their capacity to discern what is appropriate and improve practice.

The role of the forums in the diffusion of the practice of the group activities is one dimension of capacity development. Forum members not only applied their knowledge from practice to generate new ways of serving their own clients; they also shared their models with their members of the community of practice. Participation in the forum thus expanded the impact of the creative practice beyond the boundaries of their own organizations.

My observations of the forum discussions also extend the findings of previous research on street-level contributions to governance. While the findings of previous studies rely on the researchers’ analysis of the resonance between observed actions or elicited comments and organizational routines and schemas, I witnessed the practitioners’ independent efforts to make sense of the challenges of self-sufficiency practice. Forum members deliberated together to improve their understanding of the limitations of the FSS designs for giving clients the supports they need to succeed and they discussed the reasons for declining attendance in the group activities. To some extent, they also sought to gain approval of their interpretations and actions from one another. The forums were thus venues for sensemaking – or the work of understanding – and sensegiving – or the work of influencing others.

Fragmented Sensemaking, Bounded Responsibility, and Legitimated Autonomy: Analyzing the discussions about group activities in relation to Maitlis’ (2005) taxonomy of forms of sensemaking and Maitlis and Lawrence’s (2007) concepts of “bounded responsibility” elucidates how the practitioners employ this strategy of creative practice in light of the inter-related factors...
of the FSS program design, the degree of interdependence among the actors, and nature of forum facilitation. The practitioners' efforts to deepen their understanding of declining attendance and their assessments of their modifications to the practice exemplify "fragmented sensemaking" with respect to both process and outcome characteristics.

In Maitlis' taxonomy, sensemaking is fragmented when stakeholders engage in animated interactions that continue over time, among numerous actors, are only minimally controlled by leaders, and produce multiple, individualistic accounts that result in emergent series of inconsistent (or disconnected) actions. Similarly, the entire forum membership participated in discussions that extended over years of FSS practice. The format and content of the meetings were relatively uncontrolled by forum conveners or facilitators. In contrast to the discussion about the Section 8 staff's reluctance to cooperate with FSS recruitment efforts analyzed in Chapter 3 or the JOBLINK practitioners' discussions of changes to the Good Faith Effort I describe analyze in the following section of this chapter, the forum's chairperson did not intervene in the practitioners' deliberations about group events. Forum discourse was animated in that the practitioners volunteered their diverse ideas about the value of the group activities, the causes of declining attendance, and possible solutions to the problem.

The practitioners did not seek agreement on a preferred account and did not attempt to synthesize the variations into a unified explanation for declining participation. Nor did they aim to persuade others to act according to a standardized conception of good practice. Rather, each practitioner was free to respond to her own assessment of what was feasible in light of her organization, service delivery system, and other obligations and priorities.

The degree of perceived urgency about resolving the problem of low attendance and the extent to which actors depend on one another for a resolution account for why these sensemaking efforts were fragmented as opposed to "guided" towards a unitary account of the problem and pursuit of more consistent actions (Maitlis and Lawrence 2007). The majority of practitioners did not consider the group activities to be among the most critical aspects of self-sufficiency practice. Moreover, unlike stakeholders engaged in sensemaking within a single organization, these practitioners were largely independent rather than interdependent agents. As members of a community of practice, the practitioners were not bound by the authority of a single organizational hierarchy. Nor did the FSS program designs or state contracts bind them to a standard set of guidelines for group activities. Rather, the practitioners enjoyed considerable
discretion to shape their self-sufficiency practice according to their independent interpretations of what works for their clients, in their implementation environment. Forum discourse thus evidenced the members' “bounded responsibility” (Maitlis and Lawrence 2007) both with respect to decisions about action and their relationships with other actors.

While collective responsibility was bounded in Maitlis and Lawrence’s sense, forum members were also bound together by the ties of the community and their commitment to good self-sufficiency practice. In certain respects, community of practice members’ shared sense of responsibility guided rather than fragmented their efforts to understand what responsible self-sufficiency practice entails. For example, they articulated norms for “good turnout” to workshops. They also agreed that client feedback after regular participation in the groups is more indicative of its value than individual clients’ decisions not to attend. In this respect, sensemaking led to common understanding of appropriate FSS practice that lent internal consistency to each practitioner’s subsequent actions, even as these actions differed across the membership. Consequently, these disagreements did not result in a collapse of sensemaking where shared meaning breaks down (Weick 1993; Maitlis 2005). Rather, forum discourse fostered tolerance of differences in interpretations or what might be construed as pluralistic sensemaking that generates *legitimated autonomy* instead of a unified account and direction for action.

6.3 Scaling-Up Creative Practices to Sustain Clients’ Motivation through the Collective Action of Forum Members

A few years after the peer support groups had become an established component of the repertoire of FSS practice, forum members expanded on the model by taking advantage of the additional resources gained from working together as a community. What became the Annual FSS Retreat convened clients from each of the nonprofit practitioner’s programs across the state for more intensive peer learning, mutual support and encouragement as well as a rare chance for rest and reflection. My description evidences that the collective enterprise added value to FSS practice that none of the practitioners could have delivered on their own.

The six years of retreats followed a similar evolutionary path to the agency-specific peer support groups. Forum members first sought to improve the content of the two-day program and later grappled with a similar phenomenon of declining attendance. I tell the story of this evolution to elucidate how the practitioners engaged in sensemaking in the context of collective
rather than individual practice. As in my examination of sensemaking in the forum discussions about agency-specific group activities, I analyze the forum’s extended discourse about the retreat by elaborating on Maitlis’ taxonomy of sensemaking forms. I suggest that forum deliberations about the collective enterprise initially entailed self-guided sensemaking in which the practitioners led themselves towards consensus about improvements to annual retreat programming. Subsequently, the practitioners’ discourse about the implications of declining attendance entailed minimal sensemaking that resulted in I explicate this transition in relation to the practitioners’ commitment to the creative practice, their sense of responsibility to one another, and the erosion of their deliberative capacity.

From Initial Idea to an Annual Practice: The forum’s Alternative Economics Sub-Committee presented their plan to take the idea for the two-day FSS retreat in July of 1996. The minutes captured the multiple objectives:

It is hoped that the overnight will balance rest/renewal for the participants and a program looking at people’s economic situation, including strategies from our own or other people’s experiences. It will also be an opportunity to get feedback on FSS itself.

One of the Sub-Committee members followed up on a recommendation from a board member of her agency to forge a connection with a retreat center staff in an idyllic setting on the North Shore of Massachusetts. The retreat center was eager to donate its facilities, room and board, as well as some informal facilitation as part of the center’s mission to afford low-income women the chance to take time away from their harried lives for inner-reflection and spiritual renewal. Each practitioner took responsibility for recruiting and selecting participants to ensure that they did not exceed the maximum of 20 participants. The practitioners also arranged transportation for themselves and their clients and brought snacks, arts and crafts materials, and board games in addition to their good spirits and expectations for relaxation and fun.

The format for the retreat was similar to that of the peer support meetings but on a larger scale. The two-day experience began with an exercise for the FSS participants and practitioners from the eight different agencies to get to know one another and begin the process of talking with one another about their feelings of frustration, gratitude, pride, and hope about their efforts to achieve their self-sufficiency goals. Time was also set aside for a group discussion about the year’s successes that paralleled the check-ins of the peer support group meetings and the round of updates in the practitioner discussion forums. The day ended with the distribution of “angel
cards” that, like the early “recognition events” acknowledged a special characteristic of each person who had participated in the retreat and sent them off with a symbol of the group’s support and encouragement.

The remainder of the retreat was less structured. In between meals and the organized sessions, the retreat participants toured the grounds, strolled on the nearby beach, engaged in guided meditation exercises led by one of the practitioners, conversed with the other attendees, or spent time by themselves reading, contemplating life, or catching up on sleep. For many of the clients, the retreat was the first time sleeping away from their families and, for some, their first extended experience away from an urban setting. One client’s response to the question about what she liked best about the retreat suggests that the practitioners’ objectives resonated with those of the participants: “It’s nice to come to a dream place and feel like a whole person with no pressure and no one needing me to do everything for them.”

**Improving the Retreat with More Structured Content and External Expertise:** Encouraged by the enthusiasm of the participants and the retreat center staff, the practitioners turned the FSS retreat into an annual event, a regularity that paralleled the recognition dinners and other annual celebrations of selected agency specific practices. Also echoing the trend in the individual practitioners’ group activities, the forum decided to introduce a theme to set the tone for the third annual retreat and to delineate the content of the structured portions of the schedule. The 1998 theme was “Workplace 2000” and the practitioners pulled together materials for a discussion on the changing nature of the workplace with its decreasing job security and increasing demands for training and education and how participants can prepare themselves to master these changes by developing their skills, planning career building steps, and balancing work and parenting. In a progression similar to that of the practitioners’ individual practices, the practitioners decided to augment the fifth annual retreat in 2000 with outside expertise. Following the recommendation of the Boston-based practitioners, the forum invited a representative from a nonprofit dedicated to workforce development in low-income communities to conduct a workshop on job retention and career development.

Although that workshop was well-received, planning for the 2001 retreat surfaced the tension between the two objectives of the retreat and the FSS program as a whole. On the one hand, the retreat aimed to develop the clients’ capacity to achieve economic self-sufficiency. On the other hand, it manifested the commitment to a more holistic view of self-sufficiency that
encompasses other life goals and the clients’ sense of fulfillment and self-efficacy. In the January 2001 meeting, the practitioners proposed a session that would build on the curriculum for Economic Literacy workshops that several of the forum members had developed over the course of the previous year as well as a screening of the video on “Nine Steps to Financial Freedom” that one of the practitioners had recently acquired. However, in the discussion the following May, the practitioners began to brainstorm about alternative possibilities. Suggestions included developing healthier relationships with children, choosing a life partner, holding a client facilitated discussion about what is working in the program, and inviting an FSS graduate or a professional inspirational speaker.

The following excerpt evidences forum members’ deliberations that eventually led to the consensus about naming enhancing self-esteem as the theme for the 6th Annual FSS Retreat.

Tina: If we can't get a person to do self-esteem issues, I would be very careful about digging deep and having a spiritual thing. If I were a participant, I would want to just relax and share at our own pace and not be told who you must share with. It shouldn't get too heavy.
Janine: It can’t be too heavy. It might get stressful.
Tina: Budgeting is safe. There are easy things to share and to deal with. You can cross the line and become schmaltzy and too deep.
Wendy: I don't think self-esteem should be therapy. It should be motivational. So hopefully people would walk way feeling good. You present it in a positive way. You don't bring people down. The Econ Lit can get punitive. We can get judgmental as well as educate. A Self Esteem workshop could be more fun.
Janine: I like "self-worth." Drawing from participants’ evaluations (of past retreats), it would be a good theme.
Tina: About last year, it was motivational but related to work. I know what you're saying.
Janine: I like the self-esteem idea. A lot of what goes on for them in the program is about self-esteem.
Tina: I don't have a problem with that. But I do need to know soon so that I can send out the flier to recruit participants.
Ruth: I agree with Wendy. I get the feeling that it's supposed to be fun and affirming.
Barbara: Let's give ourselves a short span of time (to find someone to give the workshop).
Amy: Self-esteem touches every part of people's life. We'd get more bang for our buck. It's supposed to be reflective.

As in the deliberations about the reasons for declining participation in the peer support groups discussed above, the practitioners articulated diverse perspectives about the key criteria for choosing the theme and the potential focus on self-esteem. They raised concerns about overstepping boundaries between personal and professional relationships, between education and judgment, between being punitive and inspiring motivation, and between therapy and fun.
Unlike the discussions about the individual practice of peer support groups, however, the forum members sought to reach an agreement about next steps. The need to settle on a theme early enough to invite participants propelled the group towards consensus, yet the tone of the meeting was not hasty. References to evaluations of past retreats and their common sense of the centrality of self-esteem to clients’ success in the program as well as the core purpose spirit-of-the-retreat steered the discussion to a convergence of understanding and sentiments. Despite the diversity of perspectives, reaching this agreement required little effort. They arrived at a common understanding and persuaded one another to embrace the focus on self-esteem in what may be better seen as sense-finding as opposed to sense-making or sense-giving.

Reassessing the Retreat as a Valued Addition to the Collective Routine: Despite the enthusiasm about the theme, ideal weather, and the customary enthusiasm from retreat staff and participating clients, the practitioners’ post-retreat reflections in the following forum meeting expressed frustration and disappointment. The Boston-based nonprofit that specialized in workshops on building self-esteem among low-income girls and women had seemed like an ideal fit. However, the practitioners found that the content of the presentation was too general and too abstract to inspire and motivate either the program participants or themselves. Moreover, forum members agreed that despite the presenters’ experience and organizational credentials, the presentation did little to expand on the understanding of self-esteem and how to enhance it that they had gleaned on their own, in the course of FSS practice and life experience.

Another criticism was directed towards the housing agencies. Unlike the presenter from the previous year, this organization exacted a fee for the workshop. Each agency was to have contributed one-eighth of the expense. The failure of some of the agencies to follow through with this commitment put additional burdens on those who fulfilled their obligation. Debriefing about these disappointments led the practitioners to the conclusion that more careful selection and advanced preparation with guest experts and earlier and more intensive persuasion tactics with their department supervisors and directors would sufficiently address these challenges in the future.

By far the most disappointing and the least tractable problem was the low turnout for the event. As in the group events of the practitioners’ practices, initial interest in attending the retreat was followed by last minute cancellations. Unplanned illnesses or childcare problems had prevented some clients from attending every retreat. However, cancellations were becoming
increasing common and by the 2001 retreat, over a dozen clients announced that they would be unable to attend too close to the event to allow others to organize child care to take advantage of the opening. Moreover, the retreat center staff had expressed their consternation at the cancellations that represented lost revenues without the benefit of actually serving their mission to help low-income women. As a result, they decided that future retreats would be subsidized, yet the agencies would need to pay to cover some of the costs.

In subsequent meetings, the practitioners deliberated about their response to the attendance problem. Their first proposals adopted the incentive and sanction approach to motivation. They suggested exacting a deposit from the clients as an incentive for following through with the commitment, with forfeited fees either to be donated to the retreat center or put into a fund for future retreats. Drawing from the experience of what works in the local group events, forum members also suggested holding raffles or distributing prizes and gift certificates. These ideas were dismissed as excessive and ineffectual measures to address the underlying problem of low attendance. As one practitioner commented:

It's sad for me that we're trying to do something nice and on top of that, we have to do something nicer. ... It's an incentive for something that's free! To add more incentives won't work.

Retreat planning was featured on the agenda of the December meeting the following year. As with the theme of self-esteem, the discussion was rich and animated and the practitioners easily agreed on an initial vision for the event. The practitioners considered adapting the model to an all day “conference” rather than a two-day retreat. The practitioners envisioned a “day of pampering” and an opportunity to meet FSS participants from other programs. Following the custom of training conferences several of the practitioners had attended, they decided to invite a motivational speaker who is “fun and energizing.” The practitioners floated ideas about inviting a nonprofit organization of local business women to give advice on professional wardrobes and hairstyles or having massage therapy or cosmetology schools offer treatments. They also discussed raising funds for the event rather than relying on contributions from the agencies. Each practitioner would contact the CRA representative from one or two local banks to request a donation.

**The Demise of the Annual Retreat:** Despite these ideas, the creative practice of the annual retreat was never resumed. Funding challenges were one obstacle. One practitioner indicated that her agency was reluctant to allow her to fundraise independently. Nor had the group
resolved the issue of where the funds raised for the retreat would be held. However more significant explanations for the demise of the practice of convening participants from across the programs for reflection and reenergizing concerned the waning enthusiasm and commitment within the forum.

The practitioners had decided to e-mail questions for a client survey to the forum Chair in order to assess interests and solicit ideas for topics, times, and locations. However, the questionnaire never got off the ground and further planning for the event was not resumed at subsequent meetings. One practitioner explained that she had e-mailed the Chair with her reservations about the value of a questionnaire. She posited that the group had already arrived at several promising agendas and, based on her experience surveying her clients about ideas for workshops, she found that interest in attending was not a good predictor of actual attendance.

Another member suggested that with so many new forum members and mounting external pressures, people were too overwhelmed to plan another event. Other factors competing for the practitioners’ attention included HUD’s proposal for dramatic changes affecting FSS and the series of budget cuts that were threatening the stability of the program and other agency funding. Discussions of these developments consumed time in the forum meetings that would have been devoted to planning the event. The fact that establishing sub-committees or task forces was no longer an active element of the forum’s repertoire of techniques for planning and implementing collective action was an additional factor. Newcomers to the group were not aware of this practice and those most involved with the small planning groups in the past were no longer members. The forum had lost its mechanisms for distributing leadership and sharing responsibility for joint action.

Street-Level Sensemaking and the Evolution of the Annual Retreat

The Extended Value of Collective Street-Level Creativity: As a collective version of the group activities, the annual FSS retreat evidences that when street-level practitioners who share a commitment to improving program practice pool their resources and energy, they are capable of more extensive creativity than each individual might have managed on her own. The retreat embodied a more robust enactment of their theory-in-use of motivation than the agency-specific peer support groups. The activities were not only educational, recreational, and supportive; they

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1 I discuss the nonprofit and public forum’s responses to these policy and budget threats in the chapter on creative coordination.
aimed to be restorative as well. Moreover, the collective enterprise also allowed practitioners who were unable to offer activities independently due to conflicting priorities or other extenuating circumstances in their agencies to offer such opportunities to their clients.

**Dynamics of Creative Practice:** The fact that the evolution of the retreat followed a pattern of expansion and subsequent contraction similar to that of the agency-specific group activities reinforces the finding that the exercise of street-level creativity is a dynamic process that entails periodic reassessment of feasibility and the value gained from carrying out the practice in response to evidence of what works and feedback from stakeholders. It is also interesting to note that, as with the agency-specific transition to workshops, in adopting the decisions to modify and ultimately abandon the retreat the practitioners did not actually question their conviction that convening clients was good self-sufficiency practice. In fact, the practitioners’ disappointment with the guest speakers’ workshop on self-esteem reinforced their sense of their own knowledge from practice that heartfelt interactions among clients experiencing similar struggles is an effective means to cultivate self-worth and confidence. I emphasize this point because it contrasts with my findings about the emergence of the practitioners theories-in-use in the story of the JOBLink forum’s Good Faith Effort Policy in the following chapter.

The demise of the valued retreat is thus an example of reluctant coping, or what Cooney terms “pragmatic acceptance” (Cooney 2007), rather than apathetic coping similar to that of those practitioners who reluctantly chose to abandon the practice of group activities. However, the deliberation about the retreat illustrates different sensemaking processes and outcomes than those I observed with respect to the practitioners’ individual experiences with group activities.

**Self-Guided Sensemaking:** Throughout the six years of planning the retreats, forum members engaged in animated brainstorming that generated a fairly rich array of ideas. In this respect, sensemaking was similar to that regarding the agency-specific group activities. In contrast to that fragmented sensemaking, the practitioners easily arrived at agreement both about how to take action and how to account for the declining participation. The outcomes of their sensemaking also differed; the forum members pursued collective action based on their unified accounts of what was desirable and developed their understanding of good retreat programming over time.

This characterization resembles Maitlis’ “guided organizational sensemaking” in which both leaders and stakeholders engage in high levels of understanding and mutual persuasion. In the
case of these forum discussions, however, the practitioners were their own leaders. As in the discussions about agency-specific group practice, the forum Chair was virtually silent. Moreover, the degree of shared interest and collective understanding among members meant that reaching agreement was relatively facile. In fact, it may be more accurate to say that they discovered a common sense rather than making or giving it.

The fact that the forum members were dependent on one another to carry out their plans accounts for this difference between fragmented and self-guided sensemaking. They relied on one another to reach the requisite threshold of participants and to coordinate different aspects of the event. And their relationships with one another were critical to forging the relationship with the retreat center and for raising the funds from their respective agencies.

*Minimal Sensemaking:* The forum’s abandonment of the retreat seven years after the annual custom was introduced illustrates a very different form of sensemaking. After the initial brainstorming about alternatives to the traditional two-day retreat, discussion was effectively aborted and action ceased. Although the Chair helped initiate a client survey to guide the practitioners’ understanding of how to refocus programming, forum members did not follow through. Communication about calling off the survey occurred in e-mail exchanges outside of the forum and without consensus from the membership. In fact, forum members never actually decided to terminate the retreat practice; the retreat met its demise by passive default. The low level of animation and control of the sensemaking effort and the uncompleted account of what to do instead and subsequent inaction are all characteristics of what Maitlis terms “minimal sensemaking.”

As with the agency-specific group activities, the fact that the practitioners (or other stakeholders) did not perceive the continuation of the retreat as a high priority influenced the dedication to strategic sensemaking. Concerns about the implications of HUD’s changes to the program and preparations for a retreat for themselves distracted the group from pursuing additional alternatives to the annual FSS participant retreat. In contrast with the agency-specific group activities, however, forum members shared collective responsibility for this outcome. Their responsibility was nevertheless significantly bounded. Although forum members were dependent on one another for planning and carrying out the retreat, they were not a fully autonomous group. With the addition of expert-led workshops and the new imposition of retreat center fees, the forum became increasingly dependent on cooperation from each member’s
agency. Despite the increasing necessity of convincing agency decision-makers to invest in the retreat, forum members did not deliberate together about sensegiving strategies.

Furthermore, turnover in forum membership and leadership entailed a loss of discursive or deliberative capacity (Maitlis and Lawrence 2007; Fung 1999; March and Olsen 1995). The practice of working in small task forces had become dormant. Nor did the forum benefit from external support to facilitate planning and implementation. Moreover, the collective memory of past retreats had been dispersed and was not a source of motivation for solution finding among current membership.

6.4 Conclusion: The Capacity for Street-Level Sensemaking and the Role of the Discussion Forums

The narratives about the agency-specific and collective group activities convey both the potential and the limitations of sensemaking as a strategy for deepening understanding about practice problems and feasible solutions and for evoking relevant stakeholders’ participation in enacting creative practices. Forum members pursued several forms of the strategy. Fragmented sensemaking generated legitimated autonomy in the context of the more independent relationships among forum members. Sensemaking— or sense-finding— was self-guided when members shared responsibility for action as well as autonomy over the process of deliberation and action. Where challenges depleted commitment to the joint project, sensemaking was minimal and energies for creative practice were directed elsewhere.

The FSS practitioners used the resources at hand to fashion new practices for developing their clients skills and sense of self-worth. However, they did not clearly engage in bricolage as an intentional strategy.

In the following chapter, the JOBLink practitioners’ efforts to develop novel practices for motivating their clients provide an opportunity to examine the feasibility of more strategic sensemaking and bricolage.
CHAPTER 7
Making a “Good Faith Effort”:
Bricolage and Sensemaking in Creative JOBLink Practice

The story of the JOBLink forum’s efforts to devise a “Good Faith Effort Policy” that
sustains clients’ motivation to make the transition from welfare to work examines how street-
level sensemaking works in a significantly different context from that of the FSS group activities
described in the previous chapter. As I explicated in Chapter 2, the JOBLink program design
was considerably more regulatory than the flexible FSS program. Consequently, street-level
practice was more contingent on the hierarchy of decision makers. The program’s technology of
incentives sanctions resulted in tensions between the state-agent and client-agent roles and made
resolution of practice problems more urgent. And these factors led to greater pressures for
standardization of street-level practice across the regional nonprofits than was the experience in
FSS implementation.

This context influenced both the “bounded responsibility” and “discursive capacity” for
sensemaking. It fostered a different form of interdependency among forum members than
evidenced in either of the preceding narratives of this chapter. It also commanded more attention
from external actors, along the hierarchy and in adjacent policy domains. In addition, the forum
enjoyed substantially greater help for facilitating deliberation and more open channels of
communication for the process of sensegiving with key decision makers.

The regulation-intensive JOBLink program design also influenced how forum members
employed the strategy of bricolage – of re-combining available resources to create new
approaches to addressing practice problems. Whereas the use of this strategy was only
somewhat apparent in the accounts of the FSS practitioners’ creative practices of group activities
– and often only questionably strategic -- it was a primary feature of creative practice in the
Good Faith Effort story. This story of the sequential phases of JOBLink forum members’ efforts
also examines how they used administrative rules and routines from JOBLink, Section 8, FSS,
and other policy contexts in their creative responses to the challenges of motivating their clients.

7.1 The Evolution of Theories-in-Use of Motivation and
the “Good Faith Effort Policy”

This chapter traces the incremental evolution of the practitioners’ efforts and their theories-
in-use in response to the phases of program implementation, developments in the implementation
environment, and the accompanying practice problems and opportunities for change. I begin the account with the preliminary phase of enrolling JOBLink participants, from January 2000, when the first vouchers were issued, through October 2000, when participants had begun to sign leases and commit to the program’s work requirements. The first phase of the practitioners’ efforts to make the program work for their clients covers the period from December 2000 through May 2001 in which challenges of compliance monitoring shifted the focus of forum discussions from clarifying eligibility rules to devising new procedures for operationalizing ambiguous compliance regulations. Creative practices developed in this phase aimed to improve the practitioners’ capacity to get the rules right.

In the second phase that spanned the September 2001 through December 2002 forum meetings, efforts focused on discerning how to make appropriate adjustments to enforcement regulations in light of clients’ personal circumstances and the challenges of finding jobs in the context of rising unemployment rates. Creative practices aimed to do the right thing for individual clients while taking into account what is fair to the entire clientele.

The third phase of the story shows how the practitioners—with the guidance of the forum chair and DHCD representative—take advantage of changes in the implementation environment and program developments to formulate farther-reaching changes to the original program design itself—to make the program better. These changes incorporated each of the facets of the practitioners’ theory-in-use as it evolved over the previous three years of JOBLink practice. The practitioners learned that motivating clients to work requires more than administering incentives and sanctions. According to the practitioners’ emergent understanding, the practice of changing behavior requires discerning participants’ efforts to comply, setting specific goals that are feasible for clients to achieve, providing constructive feedback, and for some developing their capacity to make their efforts more effective in the long term. This progression of cumulative creative practice ultimately came to a halt when HUD’s decision to phase out the Welfare-to-Work Voucher Program led to the effective end to creative efforts.

The incremental evolution of creative street-level practice also involved initial experimentation with the sub-group of clients. In each phase, changes to program practices and designs began with those directed towards participants whose temporary disabilities grant them privileges that are deemed appropriate for the rest of the clientele only in subsequent phases of sensemaking efforts.
In explicating each phase, I show how forum members used available resources for bricolage and employed the strategy of sensemaking. The analysis points to a progression of knowledge production through forum discussions. It begins with the simple reduction of uncertainty, followed by the management and exploitation of ambiguity and finally seizing the opportunity for more dramatic change. My analysis following each phase also makes use of Maitlis’ framework to assess the process and outcomes of the different forms of sensemaking pursued in different contexts.

I accompany the narrative with tables, figures, and excerpts from the 21 practitioner discussion forum meetings convened over the entire five year period. Table 7.1 identifies the defining characteristics of each phase of the narrative, the creative practices adopted and the theories-in-use that underlie the practices. Figures 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3a&b trace the developments in the program and the labor market that shape the context for each phase of the narrative. I reference the meeting excerpts in the course of describing and analyzing the practitioners’ efforts to be responsive to these developments and to use the strategies of bricolage and sensemaking to assume responsibility for making the program work.

![Figure 7.1 JobLink Voucher Issuance and Lease Up](image)

Start-Up: Clarifying Uncertainty and Bracketing Descent -- January to October 2000 (4 meetings)

In the first months after the practitioners began to implement JOBLink, the discussions in the forum focused on clarifying the complex eligibility requirements and eliciting cooperation from partners who had already signed memoranda of understanding conveying their commitment to help reach out to potential beneficiaries. In contrast to the challenges of enrolling prospective
FSS clients discussed in Chapter 3, the JOBLink practitioners faced relatively few practice problems in their efforts to meet the target of 2,000 participants. JOBLink enrollment procedures were similar to those the housing agencies use for selecting prospective tenants for other rental subsidies. This familiarity together with the understanding that the JOBLink vouchers brought in additional revenue to the agencies allowed the practitioners to engage colleagues from the regular Section 8 housing program in assessing the eligibility of large numbers applicants in a short period of time. (See Figure 7.1.) In fact, in several agencies, the process of issuing JOBLink vouchers to eligible applicants was an agency-wide endeavor with managers from various departments pitching in for extended shifts after-hours and on weekends.

In the four meetings held during the months it took to issue the first 2,000 JOBLink vouchers, forum members answered one another’s questions about eligibility requirements including the interpretation of “critical housing need” and previous receipt of TANF assistance. They shared experiences of uncooperative interactions with local DTA officials who were, according to the agreement brokered between DHCD and state-level welfare directors, required to assist in recruitment and screening. Upon hearing the practitioners’ concerns, DHCD officials helped resolve these misunderstandings by communicating with their welfare department counterparts and joining the JOBLink practitioners in meetings with DTA workers. In addition, conversations with Leslie, the DHCD Workforce Development Specialist assigned to monitor both FSS and JOBLink, who attended portions of these forum meetings, reassured the practitioners that they could adopt the standard Section 8 practice of issuing more vouchers than available subsidies would cover in anticipation that many prospective tenants would fail to find acceptable apartments within the allotted time frame.

During this period, several practitioners voiced their consternation with what they called the “punitive” program design, especially compared with FSS. As one practitioner expressed this concern in the August 23, 2000 meeting, “There are conflicting goals. In JOBLink, any job is a good job. In FSS this is not so. It's the same conflict between us and DTA in FSS. Now it’s between our own programs.” However, concerns about monitoring compliance with the work requirement and the repercussions of terminating clients for failure to comply were put on hold for future discussions. In Bill’s words, “First get them leased. Then we’ll worry about keeping them.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase of JOBLink Implementation</th>
<th>Conditions/Changes in the Environment</th>
<th>Creative Street-Level Practice</th>
<th>Sensemaking in the Forum</th>
<th>Bricolage</th>
<th>Theory of Motivation (cumulative)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Start-Up:</strong></td>
<td>tight labor market</td>
<td>Getting the Eligibility Rules</td>
<td>clarifying regulations</td>
<td>---</td>
<td><strong>Program design:</strong> incentive of housing voucher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January-October 2000</td>
<td>new funding for job training</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>restricted sensemaking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eligibility determination,</td>
<td></td>
<td>no creative street-level</td>
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<tr>
<td>issuance, lease-up</td>
<td></td>
<td>practice</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 1</strong></td>
<td>partnership with local DTA offices</td>
<td>Getting the Compliance</td>
<td>managing ambiguity</td>
<td>administrative procedures imported from Section 8</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 2000-May 2001</td>
<td>developed</td>
<td>Regulations Right</td>
<td>supported sensemaking</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Program design:</strong> contractual obligation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin compliance monitoring</td>
<td></td>
<td>Job Search Logs</td>
<td>fragmented sensemaking</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Theory-in-use:</strong> discern efforts as well as achievements; set specific goals</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1st version of GFE policy</td>
<td>guided sensemaking</td>
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<td>Draft Temporary Disabilities</td>
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<td>Policy</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 2</strong></td>
<td>rising unemployment in some areas</td>
<td>Doing the Right Thing for</td>
<td>exploiting ambiguity</td>
<td>administrative procedures adapted from Section 8</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2001-December 2002</td>
<td>evidence of insufficient</td>
<td>Individual Clients</td>
<td>fragmented sensemaking</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Program design:</strong> sanction of termination</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>assistance in job search</td>
<td>new procedures for</td>
<td>fragmented self-guided</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Theory-in-use:</strong> set specific and feasible goals; provide constructive feedback; expand capabilities to reach goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>from service partners</td>
<td>communicating with clients</td>
<td>sensemaking</td>
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<td>and partners</td>
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<td>Specialized Reps (some</td>
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<td>Explore “Bad Economy”</td>
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<td>FSS Approach for clients w</td>
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<td>temporary disabilities</td>
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<td>Committee of Disability</td>
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<td>Experts</td>
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Table 7.1  The Evolution of the “Good Faith Effort Policy”: Context, Strategy, and Theory-In-Use (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 3</th>
<th>Making the Program Better</th>
<th>Theory in Use</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 2003 - October 2003</td>
<td>high unemployment throughout the state; reduced funding for training programs; reduced Section 8 issuance</td>
<td>recombination of previous creative practices and the “FSS Approach” reach goals</td>
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<td>terminations and appeals more frequent; additional JOBLink vouchers; withdrawal of welfare department sponsorship</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Making the Program Better</strong></td>
<td><strong>Theory in Use</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>seizing window of opportunity</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>2nd Good Faith Effort Policy: Promoting Employability:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New Contract of Participation: standardized extension of job search timeframe; “suitable employment”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Career Development Plan”: individualized requirements; 2 year educational programs; volunteer/internship</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Career Development Activity Logs”: mandatory one-on-one meetings, reduced frequency of reporting requirements</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Expanded Specialized Reps for all</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase-Out: March 2004 through present</td>
<td>further budget cuts</td>
<td>no additions</td>
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<tr>
<td>HUD’s decides to phase out the program; JL and FSS forums merge; meetings less frequent</td>
<td><strong>Phasing Out</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>no creative practice</strong></td>
<td>minimal sensemaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>uncertainty</strong></td>
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</table>

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In sum, in this start-up phase getting the program up and running took precedence over deliberating about competing theories of how to promote self-sufficiency and how to compel people to embark on life-changing experiences. Instead, sensemaking efforts focused on clarifying regulations and reducing uncertainty about the implications of over-enrollment. Communication with DHCD representatives, Steering Committee members, and agency directors helped the practitioners understand the expectations and persuaded housing and other service partners to cooperate. All actors involved in the enrollment endeavor relied on the existing repertoire of Section 8 procedures with little need for modification to the task of enrolling JOBLink participants. Maitlis’ category of restricted sensemaking, in which stakeholders show little motivation to take responsibility and leaders control the process of understanding and influencing action, aptly characterizes these early discussions.

Phase 1: Managing Ambiguity To Get Compliance Right -- December 2000 to May 2001 (5 meetings)

By the December 6, 2000 meeting, the practitioners had issued well over 2000 vouchers to eligible clients and several hundred of these had successfully leased approved units. (See Figure 7.1.) In the five meetings that followed through May 2001, the discussion in the forum reflected the shift in the practitioners’ focus from selecting and enrolling clients to monitoring their compliance with the program’s work requirements. As I described in Chapter 2, the incentive of the housing voucher and the possible sanction of losing the housing assistance for failure to comply with the work requirements were the core technologies of the JOBLink program design. The accompanying contract of participation formalized this commitment; accepting the voucher meant embracing the work obligation. While compliance was conceived in absolute terms, program regulations also included provisions to take into account extenuating circumstances.

In line with this theory of motivation, JOBLink participants who were fired or voluntarily quit their jobs were considered “at fault” and faced termination of their rental assistance if they did not find employment within two months or if they failed to enroll in an approved short-term job training program. Clients who were laid off or were dismissed for other reasons beyond their control were considered “not at fault” and were granted a longer period of time for job search and/or re-employment training. In either situation, the practitioners had the discretion to grant extensions for the clients determined to be “making a good faith effort to secure re-employment.” The regulations also allowed clients who were not able to work due to a
temporary disability to continue to receive housing assistance. Those who became permanently
disabled were to be switched to a conventional Section 8 voucher without the work requirement
whereupon the JOBLink voucher would be reissued to a different eligible client.

Interpretation of the ambiguous concepts of “fault,” “good faith effort,” and “disability
status” was largely left to the JOBLink practitioners. The following account of the discussions
during this period elucidates how members helped one another make sense of appropriate
responses to participants’ individual circumstances in light of this ambiguity. It describes how
they employed the strategies of bricolage to fashion new practices for operationalizing JOBLink
directives from established administrative routines from other programs. The account also
conveys how sharing these newly crafted practices with fellow forum members surfaced
questions about whether program expectations were feasible for clients to meet and how to make
exceptions for some individuals while being fair to others.

By their May 2001 meeting, the practitioners had designed the first version of their “Good
Faith Effort Policy” and a policy for participants with temporary disabilities that incorporated
their theory-in-use that motivating clients to work necessitates discerning their effort to do so and
setting specific interim goals as well as monitoring their achievements.

**Sharing Novel Procedures for Discerning Clients’ Efforts and Disabilities:** As the
JOBLink practitioners began to work with the leased clients, forum meetings provided
opportunities to clarify the regulations and share ideas about how to operationalize them.
Among the new procedures were job search activity logs in which clients who were not currently
employed recorded their job seeking efforts and submitted them to the practitioners on either a
weekly or bi-weekly basis. In addition to documenting that clients were complying with the
requirements to seek and maintain employment, the logs introduced an additional motivational
device beyond the threat of sanctions; they allowed the practitioners to guide participants
towards specific interim goals similar to those included in the reporting forms in the more case
management intensive FSS program. For example, MBHP’s job search activity log listed
examples of acceptable job search activities including: “created or updated my resume; wrote a
cover letter for a job; applied for a job listed in a newspaper or on the internet; picked up, filled
out, and submitted a job application; went on an interview; wrote a thank you letter after I had an
interview; and went to a job fair.”
The practitioners also adopted procedures common in other service programs to address the challenge of acquiring adequate documentation of temporary disabilities for authorizing suspensions or adjustments of the work requirement; they drafted standardized letters to health care professionals that explained the need to stipulate how long the client will not be able to work or under what conditions they could work. In response to the frequent problem of delays in obtaining sufficient documentation, the practitioners designed release forms to allow them to contact health care professionals and other case managers directly. These documents were easily replicated for adoption in each JOBLink practitioner's practice.

Other new practices addressed internal administrative procedures. Forum members exchanged ideas for improving communication with the Section 8 Program Reps so as to consolidate information about changes in work status, income, place of residence and housing related violations. And a practitioner from one of the larger agencies spent part of one of these meetings demonstrating a computer database he had designed to simplify compliance tracking for large case loads. In contrast to the letters and release forms, adoption of these practices across the forum membership depended on the size of the practitioners' case loads and the number of clients who were facing difficulties in meeting the work requirements, availability of appropriate computer software, and the degree to which intra-departmental coordination proved challenging.

However, some of the challenges of documentation proved beyond the practitioners' capacity to address on their own. Forum discussions referenced conflicts with colleagues in other service agencies who advised clients about work and disabilities in ways that jeopardized their compliance with the JOBLink requirements. A presentation of these conflicts at the JOBLink Steering Committee led the welfare department representative to promise to clarify the JOBLink requirements with local line staff. However, the Steering Committee was unable to help the practitioners pursue their suggestion to expedite review of disability appraisals for JOBLink clients because the Social Security Administration was not within the committee's realm of influence. Nor were the practitioners able to resolve the challenge of clients who exhibited signs of acute depression yet were unable to muster the energy to obtain the necessary documentation of their mental health condition to validate suspension of the work requirement. Rather than resolve the problem, forum members vented their exasperations with their peers and
reassured one another that undiagnosed mental health is a serious and common ailment that, despite their desire to help, requires the expertise of mental health professionals.

Deliberating about Ambivalence Towards Work-First Goals and the Technology of Sanctions: At the same time the practitioners were developing practices to discern whether clients were making an effort to comply with the work requirements, they were also deliberating about the program’s work-first goals and its sanction-oriented technology for promoting self-sufficiency. Some practitioners reiterated concerns that the work obligation was preventing clients from pursuing the training and education necessary to secure long-term job stability and to develop life-sustaining careers. Excerpt 7.1 from the December 6, 2000 meeting illustrates the tensions that arose in the forum in response to the idea of using the job search logs as means to establish “good faith effort.”

![Figure 7.2 Unemployment in Massachusetts (Seasonally Adjusted Rates)](image)

The disagreements about the creative practice of job search logs voiced in this excerpt reflect the forum members’ ambivalence about the program design and their struggles about effective strategies for motivating clients. One set of questions concerned whether even the most motivated clients would be able to meet the expectations. Forum members pointed to clients’ lack of prior work experience, the costs of transportation, childcare and related expenses, their unfamiliarity with the culture of work, and their lack of a cushion to support them in transitions.
They also questioned whether the current job market would continue to be favorable to inexperienced jobseekers in the future (See Figure 7.2 for evidence of the relatively low unemployment at this time.) The practitioners based these concerns on their past experience with FSS clients and their personal experiences with job seeking, both of which informed their implied assumptions about what seeking and maintaining employment entails.

The excerpt also reflects the practitioners' ambivalence regarding the desirability of strict enforcement of the work requirements. Although there was consensus in the forum that setting specific goals for job search would benefit their clients, many reiterated earlier criticisms that the work obligation was too punitive and did not afford the training and education necessary to become "truly independent" in the long term. Others countered that JOBLink participants had "jumped the waiting list" on condition that they agree to work the minimum hours and that "setting the bar too low" would undermine the effect of the requirement as well as violate principles of fairness to others in need of housing assistance.

In addition, the practitioners raised questions about how feasible it would be to accommodate these concerns within the parameters of the regulations and their discretion. They acknowledged that encouraging career building job experience rather than "churning" through entry-level jobs would be hard work. And although they pointed to the roles of welfare caseworkers and career center staff, they did not express confidence that this support would be sufficient to give clients adequate direction and feedback. The discussion closed with the affirmation that they "need to learn what is needed."

The policy combined elements of the practitioners' agency-specific practice improvements discussed in the previous meetings. Clients would assume the burden of proof to demonstrate that they are "making a good faith effort" according to the specifications of the policy. In addition to submitting letters from physicians, employers, welfare workers, or training program staff to establish the reasons for not being employed, the clients would submit a job search activity log similar to those discussed in the December meeting excerpted above. After considerable debate, the practitioners eventually reached a compromise to require clients to apply for an average of five jobs a week with the stipulation that practitioners could adjust the requirement with respect to "the type of work sought and the availability of jobs."

The group proposed to enforce the stipulation that clients must accept any reasonable job offer even if it did not meet their expectations for genuinely "suitable employment" that could be
Excerpt 7.1 Setting Goals vs. Being Punitive

JB: Most of them (the clients) are looking for entry level jobs and jobs are out there.
Wendy: But times can change. Jobs may not be there in the future. We put in (the requirement to apply for) only two jobs a week [in contrast to seven in JB’s agency.]
Tina: There’s also the new client profile. Many of my clients come from the New Parents Program. We’re seeing people looking for their first job. They’re not talking about resumes and first interviews, second interviews. ... That’s like me!
JB: We come into the picture to teach them skills in goal setting.
Amelia: One Stops [established by the WIA Act] can help them make their resume. But if we have a copy, we can help grant them an extension.
Jane: We don’t want to set the bar too low. I am one of those people who thought we wouldn’t be able to accomplish what we’ve done.
Jenn: We can revise it [the job search requirement] if the economy takes a down turn.
Sharon: I lost my job and in two months, I only went for seven jobs. We have to make many exceptions for these people. They have constraints: transportation, childcare, their teeth...
Tina: But we have to understand that these people jumped the waiting list and all they have to do is work 17 hours a week.
Bill: But they may have had a job when they applied.
Sharon: Those that chum in and out, I just refer them to the Career Centers. Just to have a job to keep the voucher makes no sense. They need to have a job that suits the transportation, childcare, etc that they can get.
Wendy: How long can they keep a job flipping burgers? I’ve done that kind of work...
Tina: They need to do some training. They need to not get pregnant. Being a professional mother is not a job.
Jenn: (to Tina) Are you telling them that?
Tina: No.
Others: They can keep the job and continue to work, get family leave.
Bill: Preventing churning: it could be a lot of work.
JB: Keep in mind what other agencies are doing. For example, DTA’s (the welfare department) about “work-first.” It’s not like it’s ideal, but it’s in place. Also day care – they need to put in work time in order to keep the voucher. These prevent other education efforts. 7 may be too high a number... But a number is good, to help them set goals.
Wendy: I agree with goal setting. Also, it often to comes to personal hygiene.
Sharon: This population is like the rest of society, a melting pot of all of the people.
Amelia: Except that they are very poor. They don’t have a cushion. They don’t have other resources.
Bill: These jobs are not meeting self-sufficiency standards. This is why I’m against the punitive thing. DTA is saying "Just get a job no matter what it pays." For us, getting people truly independent is the goal. And that’s a long haul. They need education. These people don’t have any resources to get the good jobs. So they go backward. This economy has been in line (with this philosophy), but it’s not going to last forever. These people don’t have the resources to pay the secondary and tertiary costs like transportation. We don’t want to be punitive. We want to be flexible. To help them help themselves.
Jane: The obligation is punitive enough. We need to learn what is needed, to learn who are the repeat unemployed and how to red flag them sooner. That’s why I like a more rigid requirement. The idea is to get to them earlier.
considered part of a career building strategy. Yet in keeping with many members’ desire to expand training and education opportunities, the group agreed to allow clients to engage in any welfare department or Department of Employment and Training approved program as long as they attended at least 75% of the sessions. While some still maintained that the employment goals were unrealistic for many of the clientele, the practitioners reached consensus once they included the stipulation that each practitioner “reserved the right to consider mitigating circumstances.” After seeking input from one of the agency’s staff attorney’s, the practitioners submitted their new policy to the Sub-Committee Chair and Leslie, DHCD’s Workforce Development Coordinator for their approval.

Subsequent approval by DHCD and the JOBLink Steering Committee evidences the success of the practitioners’ sensemaking efforts. Members of the community of practice first convinced one another of the value of their consolidated creative practices and the rationale ultimately persuaded system actors that the modifications were consistent with the program intentions.

Creative Practice for Doing the Right Thing for Temporarily Disabled Clients: During this process of refining the “Good Faith Effort Policy,” the practitioners also applied the strategy of bricolage to devise a policy to help temporarily disabled clients meet the work requirements. Concerns about upholding norms and legislation for protecting the rights of the disabled escalated the pressure to address the limitations of the work-first approach. In recognition that suspending work requirements would require a more substantial departure from official JOBLink regulations than the provisions of the GFE Policy, the practitioners decided to invite Leslie, the DHCD Workforce Development Coordinator, to the portion of upcoming meetings where policy changes would be discussed to elicit her preliminary feedback and insights about how to frame them to win decision-makers’ approval. By the May 8, 2001 meeting, Leslie had consolidated the forum’s suggestions into an initial “Temporary Disabilities Policy,” a draft the group would test in practice and then refine before submitting it to DHCD and the JobLink Steering Committee. As Leslie described it:

The idea is that for the most part, employment stability and success and housing stability and success go hand in hand. All things equal, employment is best. But all things are NOT equal. It's like the "FSS approach." It helps people get there. It's goal oriented and helps (the clients) regain employment. It’s client centered, not just us imposing our views on them. It is contractual – with time frames and deadlines. It is monitored – we won't disappear for a year. It's a suspension of the employment obligation – but they still have to stay in touch. It's amendable – you can return in four months, or nine months, or in a year.
Like the GFE Policy, this draft policy for temporarily disabled participants imported components of the FSS program design to embrace the practitioners’ evolving theory-in-use about motivating participants to work. The GFE policy incorporated the specific interim job search goals from the FSS reporting forms while the draft Temporary Disabilities Policy took the “FSS Approach” a step further to tailor specific time frames for each client’s work suspension. Both of these creative practices expanded the JOBLink practitioner’s role to include more extensive case management than the program design’s compliance monitoring required. With the GFE Policy, the additional performance tracking extended the practitioners’ interactions with clients from point in time assessments of compliance to a more continuous process for getting the regulations right the practitioners considered more feasible for clients to pursue. The proposed Temporary Disabilities Policy entailed additional ongoing routines for doing the right thing for each temporarily disabled client, including tailoring the obligation to accommodate emergent obstacles and the providing feedback and encouragement the practitioners considered key for sustaining clients’ motivation.

While the practitioners’ resolved concerns about administrating the GFE Policy’s individualized exceptions fairly by adopting new standards to be undertaken across the member agencies for the entire clientele, the practitioners legitimated their individualized approach to temporary disabilities by referencing their capacity for appropriate discernment. The knowledge gleaned from interactions with the clients and input from the legal services advocates was deemed sufficient for applying work requirement suspensions fairly, without compromising accountability to other clients. In this respect, the practitioners acted as both client-agents and state-agents while also striving to remain accountable to their communities of practice – their own community of self-sufficiency workers and those in the social service delivery system. By the end of the meeting, the practitioners embraced the amendment even as they acknowledged that every suspension would entail additional documentation, another entry in a database, and more extensive interactions with clients. Rather than reduce complexity to cope with the strains of self-sufficiency work, the practitioners took on additional responsibilities to improve their ability to address clients’ needs.

Thus both the GFE Policy and the Temporary Disabilities Policy proposal sought to institutionalize the practitioners’ creative ideas for discerning and guiding clients efforts as extensions of JOBLink regulations. This emphasis on the process of encouraging the pursuit of
employment goals in addition to assessing achievements marked a distinct departure from the original program design. They did not, however, resolve the tensions between about broadening the scope of the program goals to include enhancing long-term employability in addition to promoting short-term employment.

**Summation of Creative Practice in Phase 1:** In sum, forum discussions in the first phase of JOBLink implementation enabled the practitioners to manage complex and ambiguous program regulations so as to make their efforts to *get compliance right* more feasible. As adept bricoleurs, forum members imported common administrative procedures and used available computer technology to devise new routines for discerning whether their clients were complying with program requirements. Forum discussions afforded exchange of these creative practices among members and practitioners adopted these suggestions in accordance with their agency-specific circumstances. These discussions thus employed the fragmented form of sensemaking to foster *legitimated autonomy* similar to discourse about group activities in the FSS forum; self-facilitated discussion welcomed multiple ideas with little effort to seek agreement or concerted action.

In contrast, ambiguity about which work-related activities were sufficient to constitute a “good faith effort” required the practitioners to reach consensus. The group assumed responsibility for devising a common standard for appropriate compliance monitoring. With the forum chair’s facilitation, deliberation ultimately found an adequate compromise among members’ diverse perspectives. However, the practitioners’ limited discretion did not allow them to resolve their conflicting ideas about the effectiveness of the work-first self-sufficiency strategy. Nor did they have an opportunity to engage decision-makers in deliberating about the program goals or technologies. Those whose personal self-sufficiency beliefs were antithetical to those of the program design had no recourse other than to resign their positions. The remaining members resolved to further their understanding of the adequacy of the JOBLink design through accumulating more experience.

To elaborate on Maitlis’ taxonomy of sensemaking forms, these discussions can be characterized as *supported sensemaking*. The forum Chair’s facilitated rather than steered the largely self-led discussion of divergent views. And, in decision makers’ absence, the practitioners assumed what responsibility their discretion afforded to act consistently on their unified understanding.
The perceived urgency to resolve ambiguity about the work requirements for temporarily disabled clients afforded the practitioners the additional support of guided sensemaking. Leslie’s help, expanded the practitioner’s discursive capacity; they were able to draft an alternative compliance policy that departed more substantially from the official regulations for this subgroup. Their use of the bricolage strategy to adapt the “FSS Approach” was also more extensive than the importing of Section 8 routines for the other creative practices discussed so far in this chapter.

**Phase 2: Exploiting Ambiguity to Create New Systems to Do the Right Thing for Individual Clients and Make the Program More Feasible for Temporarily Disabled Clients (September 2001 through December 2002)**

The second phase of the practitioners’ efforts to improve JOBLink practice is characterized by their responses to developments in the life cycle of the program and changes in the economic and policy environment. As an increasing number of JOBLink participants reached the end of the permitted job search period without having secured employment for the requisite monthly 75 hours, the challenging task of enforcing the program’s sanctions became a more prevalent component of JOBLink practice. In November 2001, administrative records showed that, across the eight programs, a total of 48 participants had their housing assistance terminated for failure to comply with the work requirements and other program obligations. By December of the following year, that number had climbed to 70. Although 70 participants are a small proportion of the 2,000 person portfolio, each of these terminations entailed difficult decisions about how to balance accountability to the regulations and fairness to prospective participants on the waiting lists, on the one hand, with concern for program participants who would face even greater hurdles to supporting their families with the loss of the housing voucher, on the other hand. As Figures 7.3 a and b illustrate, practitioners were also devoting increasing amounts of time to decisions about suspending work obligations for participants who faced extenuating circumstances.

The economic recession and accompanying social service budget cuts exacerbated these challenges, both for the JOBLink participants seeing work and for the practitioners committed to helping clients meet the program’s expectations. As Figure 7.2 shows, state unemployment rates

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1 Throughout this period, the wait-list averaged over 1,600 households statewide, a considerable number given that the official program size was limited to 2,000 families.
Figure 7.3 JOBLink Terminations and Employment Obligation Suspensions

Figure 7.3b Quarterly Non-Compliance in Statewide JOBLink
rose from a low of 2.6% when the program was first implemented in May of 2000 to 4.9% in January of 2002 and subsequently rose to 5.6% later that year. (Bureau of Labor Statistics).

The following account explicates how the practitioners sought to introduce creative practices to do the right thing for their clients in light of each of these developments. They discussed the novel practices they adopted for improving communication with clients and partners and deliberated with one another about how to promote appropriate compliance given the limits of their discretion. And the practitioners sought to understand how they might respond pro-actively to the economic downturn.

In addition to explicating how the practitioners use sensemaking and bricolage to craft their responses, the following accounts reveal the simultaneous evolution of the community of practice’s theory-in-use of motivation. As in the previous phase, the practitioners succeeded in applying their expanded theory-in-use to improve the program for clients with temporary disabilities before they were able to do so for the rest of the clientele.

Creative Practices for Improving Communication about Compliance With Work Requirements:

The practitioners adapted existing administrative procedures and structures to devise new practices for communicating with clients about compliance with the work requirements, addressing conflicts with external service partners, and coordinating with colleagues in the regular Section 8 program. Each of these endeavors introduced new modes for sensemaking and sensegiving with key actors in JOBLink practice. In addition to sharing these practices with one another, forum members also deliberated together about the how to address the challenges to appropriate compliance enforcement when such improved communication proved insufficient.

As I suggest following the descriptions, these fragmented sensemaking efforts reflect the boundaries of the practitioners’ capacity to change program regulations and alter established procedures – both with respect to their contributions and the limits to these contributions.

Creative Practices for Communicating with Clients about Compliance: As increasing numbers of JOBLink participants faced termination of their housing subsidies for failing to comply with the work requirements, forum members recounted challenging dilemmas and sought one another’s advice about how to respond with compassion to each client and with accountability to the program regulations and other participants. One theme of discussion was
implications of not fulfilling them accounted for the escalating non-compliance rates. Practitioners shared the techniques they adopted to address this practice problem. They talked about the language they used to discuss the obligations with participants and shared ideas for using graphics and to highlight the work obligations in the official contracts of participation. Forum members also shared templates for frequent reminder notices about the need to submit quarterly updates on their employment status and, for those not employed, the GFE logs.

Other newly introduced practices aimed to compel non-compliant participants to come in to the office to explain their situations so that alternatives to termination could be devised. Some practitioners shared templates of letters to warn clients of possible termination to prompt the office visit. Others explained that they first invited participants to an informal conversation called, in Section 8 parlance, a “case conference.” Another common practice discussed in the forum meetings was holding a formal termination hearing at which specific conditions for reinstating the housing subsidy were authorized. In each of these practices, the objective was to discern the reasons for the client’s failure to comply with the work requirements, to set specific goals determined to be feasible for the client to achieve with clear time-lines for achieving them, and to establish an agreement for reporting on progress.

Each of these procedures for clarifying and enforcing contractual obligations was well-established in the repertoire of compliance enforcement mechanisms in the regular Section 8 program. As with the application of familiar documentation practices to the new area of compliance with the work requirements in Phase 1, the JOBLink practitioners imported regulatory and administrative procedures for enforcing tenant rights and obligations to enforcing the work requirements.

In contrast to the previous examples of bricolage, these imported routines were used for purposes other than those in the originating Section 8 context. In the context of enforcing subsidy and lease agreements, these communication procedures serve the Section 8 staff in their capacity as mediators of conflicts among the HUD regulations, the tenants’ claims, and the property owner’s contentions about improper behavior. The information gathered is largely factual and is used to elucidate whether the details of the specific case constitute violations of each party’s contractual obligations. In the context of JOBLink practice, the practitioners expanded this mediation role to encompass the additional aim of assessing whether the clients’ efforts to comply with the work obligation warrant making exceptions to the monthly minimum of 75
hours; the knowledge gained from the interaction with clients helps delineate appropriate responses in instead of the standard procedures. Information gleaned from the interactions concerns the clients’ expressed commitment to finding and maintaining employment in addition to the extenuating circumstances that might hinder compliance. Thus, the knowledge acquired through such practitioner-client interactions is relational as well as factual and the decisions about enforcement involve human and practical judgment as well as regulatory compliance.

The task of discerning appropriate responses to clients’ non-compliance with the work requirements also placed more weight on the relationship between the JOBLink participant and practitioner than do the parallel exchanges within the Section 8 program because not all actors who influence compliance are bound in the formal program contract. Whereas Section 8 regulations clearly stipulate property owners’ obligations to tenants, no comparable stipulations pertained to employers or job placement and training providers. Consequently, the JOBLink practitioners’ judgment about appropriate responses depended on their capacity to elicit, surmise, and synthesize factual information and relational knowledge from each of these system actors. The new practices for engaging with clients thus added value by converting procedures for exerting power over clients into mechanisms for discerning how to do the right thing for them.

**Creative Practices for Addressing Conflicts with External Service Partners:** The contingency of JOBLink participants’ compliance with the work requirements on the behavior of system actors who did not have contractual obligations to participants within the framework of the program was another focus of forum discussions. As more clients encountered difficulty with the work requirements, the assumption that post-welfare stabilization casework and job search assistance from career center staff would help JOBLink participants overcome the obstacles to compliance was put to the test. Forum members reported on the same frustrations with some Career Centers’ insufficient guidance for less-skilled and inexperienced job seekers described in the chapter on FSS practitioners’ efforts to connect their clients to services. Despite efforts on the part of Steering Committee members to communicate JOBLink’s goals and requirements to local welfare offices, JOBLink practitioners found that misunderstandings and conflicting ideas about how to promote self-sufficiency persisted.

Rachelle’s account of her interactions with welfare department (DTA) colleagues in the September 25th, 2002 meeting exemplifies efforts to clarify the difference between the expectations the two programs pose to clients:
DTA determinations are influencing clients who are not meeting the work requirement. There are discrepancies in standards. I don’t accept their reasoning about the employment obligation. It creates a sort of conflict between DTA and us. … Even a minor thing – a cold or flu – gets them a suspension from the work requirement. I write (to the clients) and explain the obligation of JOBLink and I urge them to return them to work as soon as possible. They come back to me and say, “The DTA worker says I don’t have to work.” I have to clarify the Welfare-to-Work program with the DTA people.

This interaction exemplifies the creative coordination technique of fostering partner accountability discussed in the previous chapter in the context of FSS. Rachelle also described how her personal connection with a DTA worker allowed her to exercise the creative coordination technique of improving clients’ accountability to program requirements; her colleague helped her uncover a client’s fraudulent documentation of a pregnancy to avoid complying with the work requirement.

Such efforts employed only the first two categories of coordination techniques that did not augment available resources. In contrast to some FSS practitioners, the JOBLink practitioners reached out to partners to adjust routines for individuals rather than to adopt entirely new practices that introduce new resources to the service delivery system. Although the JOBLink practitioners applied these practices in numerous situations, they did not shift partners’ understanding of self-sufficiency or lead to changes in partners’ ongoing mode of intervention. Nor did forum discussions surface examples of how interacting with these partners shifted the JOBLink practitioners’ conception of self-sufficiency and how to foster it.

Yet despite the subtlety of the value added, these efforts to improve self-sufficiency practice are noteworthy because they suggest that creative coordination is feasible even in the context of more regulatory programs like JOBLink. In fact, in direct contrast with the coping mechanism of simplifying complex tasks, forum discussions during this period frequently registered the practitioners’ frustration that the pressures associated with increasingly time consuming compliance monitoring meant that they were unable to do more outreach to partners and other case management work with clients.

Creative Practices for Coordinating with Internal Partners: To carve out more time for coordinated case management practices, the practitioners devised systems to facilitate coordination with the regular Section 8 staff within their housing agencies as a means to share the burdens of client monitoring and enforcement. Each of these modifications echoed those
developed by members of the FSS discussion forum. In their April 3, 2002 meeting, JOBLink practitioners recounted how they convinced Program Reps to remind JOBLink tenants about the work obligations and reporting requirements when they met with them for annual re-certification of the household’s income status and family size and re-calculation of the tenants’ portion of the rent when household income changes. Some noted that they adopted the practice shared in the FSS practitioners’ forum of using brightly colored files for JOBLink participants to alert Program Reps to examine work activity in addition to housing issues. They discussed informal arrangements to notify one another following interactions with JOBLink clients so as to ensure that all agency staff was on the same page in communicating with clients.

The discovery that a large proportion of the JOBLink participants who had not fulfilled the work obligation had also violated terms of their housing lease, led several practitioners to adopt an informal division of labor for managing the time consuming process of mediating non-compliance cases. Section 8 Program Reps took responsibility for those clients who faced termination for the more familiar housing contract violations, while the JOBLink practitioners focused exclusively on the work requirements.

Practitioners in some of the larger agencies formalized this division of labor by working with supervisors to designate a new position of a “Specialized Rep” who would be responsible for all of the housing transactions for JOBLink participants, including the reminders about the work obligation noted above. This new organizing structure was adopted in three of the larger agencies. Although forum members agreed that this arrangement promised to improve communication with clients and streamline enforcement procedures, not all were able to make such structural changes to work organization on their own.

Excerpt 7.2 – “Sharon’s Frustrated Sensemaking” -- from the April 3, 2002 meeting depicts the group’s collective efforts to understand one member’s struggles to persuade Section 8 staff at her agency to share responsibilities for monitoring JOBLink participants’ compliance. The discussion surfaces possible sensemaking techniques and points to the limitations of Sharon’s
capacity to elicit cooperation from her co-workers and to convince her agency director to adopt the Specialized Rep model without additional supports.

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**Excerpt 7.2 Sharon’s Frustrated Sensemaking**

Sharon: I’d love that (the Specialized Rep arrangement). But they’re not going to change the system just for me. (The Program Reps) all have different personalities. One might not give me materials that clients gave her.

Wendy: You should tell your director that it’s what the other agencies are doing.

Sharon: I record the JOBLink addendum form. I check off which issue they are not in compliance with and write a comment so (the Reps) can see it. If it’s just a JOBLink issue, I go to the hearing. If it’s both, two of us go. I ask them to check if there are housing issues so that we can do it all at once. But the Reps are reluctant to do more. They complain about “your JOBLink people.” But they’re not just my people! They’re not happy about it. But it’s brought in more jobs and more money for the agency. But they don’t see it that way.

Nancy (Forum Chair): I’ll raise the issue of Specialized Reps at the next Director’s meeting. I’ll make a pitch for that. It’s true that they’ll have to work harder. There are more changes in income (with the JOBLink people rather than regular Section 8).

Sharon: True. But it ruins your relation with the Reps. You’re making them do all that extra work. The blue files!

Wendy: It helped us. In our case, the Specialized Program Rep was new. She applied for a position in a special program. So she knew about the extra work. So we don’t get that attitude.

Sharon: Only 20% are not working. That’s not so many. But they only feel the issues.

Nancy: That’s why having one person specialized helps.

Rachelle: There was and still is a great deal of resentment about FSS and that they’re getting all this money. One told me that they should abolish JOBLink.

Sharon: But it’s an excellent program. They’re working and are moving off assistance. I’ve seen them making all sorts of changes in their lives because they are working.

In responding to Sharon’s lament, forum members drew from their similar experiences working with the regular Section 8 staff to characterize Sharon’s cooperation problem as the result of the burden the JOBLink program entails for Section 8 Program Reps and the Reps’ resentment of the extra work. They also suggested that the Reps’ reluctance stems from friction over personal justice beliefs about who deserves assistance. Rachelle implicitly drew the parallel between the Reps’ consternation about allocating housing vouchers to JOBLink participants before families already on the waiting lists and their doubts about whether FSS participants deserve escrow accounts. These challenges were also seen to have a cumulative impact on working relationships as the comment — “It ruins your relations with the Reps.” — reveals.

The excerpt also illuminates Sharon’s frustrated efforts to employ the sensemaking strategy to address these practice problems. She contended that JOBLink participants are deserving of
the assistance because they are working, moving off assistance, and making changes in their lives. She reminded her Section 8 counterparts that these clients are not just “your JOBLink people” and she called attention to the revenue and new jobs the program brings to the agency. Yet this reframing of the clientele as deserving and the program as a worthwhile investment did not prove sufficient to shift perceptions of Sharon’s colleagues.

The excerpt does not tell us whether Sharon might have been more persuasive had she communicated these alternative characterizations more effectively. However, the discussion does establish that she felt ill-equipped to manage the conflict on her own. In asserting that “they’re not going to change the system just for me,” Sharon expressed her inability to act. Nor was Wendy’s advice to reference the community of practice’s endorsement of the Specialize Rep model in an appeal for the director’s intervention sufficient to help Sharon take action. Instead, Nancy – the forum Chair -- offered to serve as the liaison between the JOBLink practitioners and Section 8 directors. Her transmission of the practitioners’ framing of the problem and their rationale for inter-departmental cooperation ultimately led to the diffusion of the Specialize Rep model across the community of practice.

In sum, members of the JOBLink forum more easily adopted new practices for coordination with Section 8 staff where they entailed modest modifications to existing routines, that imitated practices developed for FSS, and did not require considerable effort on the part of their partners. Diffusion of the more structural changes to the division of labor required the support of those above the street-level in each agency’s hierarchy.

**Deliberating Together about Appropriate Compliance and the Limits of Discretion:** In addition to sharing practices for communicating with clients, other service providers, and Section 8 staff, the practitioners used their meeting time during this period to deliberate with one another about how to apply the knowledge gained from using these communication practices to make appropriate exceptions – to “do the right thing” – for particular clients. Excerpt 7.3 entitled, “Analyzing Jenn’s Dilemma,” from the November 2001 meeting illustrates this mode of deliberation and surfaces the practitioners’ frustrations about the limits of their capacity to help clients overcome the challenges to meeting the work obligations given the parameters of the program design.

The excerpt follows Jenn’s account of a family where the husband, who had been the official head of the household responsible for meeting the work requirement, was deported to
Excerpt 7.3 Analyzing Jenn’s Dilemma

Nancy: (Chairing): How does the group feel about it?
Deidre: People can’t anticipate this kind of situation.
Leslie (DHCD Representative): Maybe everyone should always anticipate this kind of situation. ...
Look at the 200 dead in New York City.
Jenn: We sent her a termination letter so that she’d actually come in. ... There had been a communication problem due to language barriers (on the phone) and perhaps her fear about contacting public authorities. (Our agency) had somehow received the letter from Puerto Rico announcing his being in custody which someone in the office translated.
Tina: This kind of thing is going to be rare.
Jenn: Here’s another similar case, but the husband is still there but can no longer work because of a disability he got on the job. ... We need to be careful about setting precedents.
Wendy: We had one where the husband was working and had an accident and went on temporary disability. The wife was exempt from the DTA termination and the work requirement because she has a child with disabilities and needs to stay home with him. The husband’s disability prevented him from caring for the child so the wife could not work in his place. But his disability is temporary.
Tina: I agree with Leslie about preparing for the worst case. (My husband) could die or run away. But it shouldn’t be that they say, “As long as one of us is working, we’re all set with the work requirement.” That’s the game of using the rent share (paid by HUD) as a way to increase available income. [She recounted a case of clients who cycled in and out of work.] Their adjusted income would fluctuate as the husband and wife alternated working and quitting so that they remained at the same income level. This is self-imposed poverty. They do it because they can’t budget. We need to start these messages early. They can’t count on this person (the spouse or boyfriend) to be their sole income source.
Jenn: But the relationship could be stable for 10 years or more..
...
Nancy: ESL is the first thing (the client needs). Doing something towards the work requirement would be the key. This will be her opportunity to become self-sufficient.
Jenn: Her speaking only Spanish is a big issue. There is someone on the FSS staff who is Spanish speaking but we still can’t really communicate with her.
Helena: Get her hooked up with FSS.
Jenn: But that’s supposed to be voluntary.
Leslie: But she needs a plan. She might as well have a plan.
Jenn: But I won’t force someone to be on FSS. If they don’t want free money, fine!

Puerto Rico.² According to the regulations, the wife was to have assumed responsibilities for the work requirement, but the woman’s lack of prior work experience, job skills, and basic English proficiency posed potentially insurmountable obstacles to compliance. The community of practice’s new repertoire of practices for facilitating communication had helped Jenn reach this understanding of the woman’s predicament. Yet that understanding was not sufficient to resolve

² The circumstance surrounding the deportation was not questioned; it was deemed extraneous to the current situation as the decision was not contingent on it and the practitioner could not influence it. Nor did they question how the family had received TANF and housing with possibly illegal immigrant status. This observation reinforces observations that street-level workers tend to focus on the aspects of the problem that they are most equipped to address.
the dilemma over appropriate compliance enforcement. Jenn asked the group to help her decide whether to give the wife more time for training before requiring her to find work so that she could gain the skills to maintain stable employment and avoid the frequently observed cycle of churning through dead-end jobs solely to fulfill the requirement.

The ensuing discussion focused more on making sense of the limitations of the JOBLink program design than it did on guiding Jenn’s decision about this particular case. Rather than focus on the specifics of Jenn’s clients, the practitioners emphasized that this type of predicament raises questions about appropriate responses in similar situations where responsibility for compliance shifts from one member of the household to another. Contributors to the discussion intimated a theory of self-sufficiency practice that assumes clients to be responsible for anticipating obstacles yet does not hold them accountable for circumstances beyond their control. Although the group did not reach consensus about whether relying on a spouse is antithetical to self-sufficiency, they affirmed that -- like acts of national terrorism -- disabilities, deportations, and job loss not attributable to “self-imposed poverty” require alternative modes of intervention. Effective communication alone is insufficient.

Yet the deliberations captured in this vignette did not generate such alternatives to standard JOBLink practice similar to those for previously identified practice problems. The discussion evidences apparent agreement about the value of helping clients formulate a plan of action to acquire the skills necessary to become self-sufficient rather than simply enforce the work requirements. At this time, however, the practitioners lacked the means to integrate this theory-in-use into JOBLink practice. Jenn’s opposition to requiring her client to enroll in FSS alluded to the FSS forum’s recent affirmation that enrollment in the program should remain voluntary. In the absence of an alternative, the discussion shifted to other topics without probing how the FSS Individual Training and Service Plan might be imported into the JOBLink context.

**Summary of Efforts to Improve Communication:** To summarize, the creative practices devised and adopted in this second phase of JOBLink implementation employed the strategy of bricolage to craft more extensive adaptations to existing administrative routines than they did in previously discussed efforts. These new practices afforded the practitioners more effective communication with clients and improved coordination with partners external and internal to the housing agencies. Knowledge gained from this communication aimed to help the practitioners discern how to “do the right thing” with respect to clients’ individual circumstances. And forum
members drew on this knowledge as they deliberated about challenging cases that tested the limits of what their discretion to make appropriate adjustments.

These examples of creative practice illustrate sensemaking on two levels. With respect to the clients and service partners, they introduced new modes of communication to deepen understanding (sensemaking) and to influence action (sensegiving) regarding particular dilemma of practice. The accounts also evidence sensemaking with respect to the practitioners’ broader understanding of the challenges of compliance practice and feasible ways of addressing those challenges. As in the previous examples of creative practice, this sensemaking was fragmented. Although there was implicit consent about the value of these communication and coordination techniques, the practices were not adopted in exactly the same way in each agency and were not equally successful with all partners. Deliberation about challenging cases elicited a rich and nuanced set of accounts of the limitations of the program design without generating a unified articulation of an alternative. The scope of the practitioners’ discretion proved insufficient to alter the work obligation for clients they sensed would benefit from more extensive education and training than was stipulated in the official regulations. Although they saw that the FSS individualized service plans would benefit some JOBLink clients, they concluded it was not feasible to adopt that approach.

Responsiveness and Responsibility in a “Bad Economy”:

In discussions during this period, the practitioners also turned their attention to making sense of the friction between the intensifying friction between JOBLink program designs and the implementation environment. In the same November 2001 meeting in which the group discussed appropriate responses to Jenn’s client’s language barriers, Jenn initiated the first of what would become a series of discussions about the economic downturn. Forum discussions aimed to assess the magnitude of the changes in the economy, the impact of the changes on program participants’ capacity to comply with the work requirement, and how the practitioners might assume responsibility for modifying established JOBLink practice.

The following narrative traces the development of the practitioners’ understanding of the economic trends and their validation of this understanding. It shows how deliberation about what community of practice members learned from various system actors contributed to the evolution of their theories-in-use about how to motivate participants to overcome the challenges of entering the workforce under such conditions and helped them to generate creative
alternatives to the program’s work-first approach to self-sufficiency. The story also conveys that their use of strategic bricolage and sensemaking afforded adoption of their creative proposals only with respect to a sub-set of temporarily disabled clients.

**Discerning Effort and Being “Proactive” in a “Bad Economy”**: Excerpt 7.4 captures forum members’ struggles to make sense of emerging economic trends, the significance of these developments for program participants, and the implications for their responsibilities to make the program work. To assess whether shifts in the economy were in fact making it harder for participants to comply with program requirements, the practitioners drew from several sources of knowledge. Their clients’ specific experiences of lay offs, hiring freezes, reduced hours, and increased difficulty finding employment with the eight month time frame were the most prominent source of evidence for early signs of recession that had yet to be officially declared.

Practitioners also interpreted clients’ experiences of these conditions in light of their knowledge from practice. They distinguished job loss due to voluntary churning through “six jobs in six months” and the “welfare mentality” of learned dependence from the labor market pressures of increasing competition for job openings. Practitioners also supplemented their assessments with the perceptions of service professionals with greater expertise in workforce issues. Yet not all forum members experienced these trends equally. Unemployment rose at different rates in different regions and geographical constraints, such as transportation challenges, impacted regions in distinct ways.

Despite the lack of consensus about the severity and comprehensiveness of the economic downturn, the excerpt shows how the observations of some members prompted the group to challenge assumptions underlying the program design. They questioned whether eight months is a long enough period to find employment when unemployment rates are high. More fundamentally, they raised questions about the program’s work-first strategy and whether mopping floors or working in fast food service precludes skills upgrading necessary to compete for more secure and sustainable employment. In addition, Dawn and Jenn’s accounts of their efforts to guide participants to more realistic employment goals and to offer constructive feedback for revising strategies imply an emerging conviction that case management in addition to simply enforcing work requirements is essential for making the program work. And even
Excerpt 7.4 Discerning Effort in a “Bad Economy”

Jenn: We talked about - and Bill had talked about it a lot - whether we should come up with a “bad economy policy.” Have you guys seen it happening? Should we come up with a group standard response? Wendy: We haven’t had people applying and not getting a job or not being able to find where to apply. Dawn: There are hiring freezes out there and (people) are not getting anything, even though they have more than a minimum education and job experience and are logging their search efforts. They're in compliance (with all of the good faith effort obligations). What triggered us to bring it up as an agenda item is that people are calling me and getting worried. It’s not me reaching out to them. Tina: Do you ask them about their resume and their skills training? Jenn and Dawn: Yes. We do that in our case management meetings as soon as they lose a job. I'll get the search logs and look at them and see how they are applying for jobs that they are not qualified for and then we'll contact them and suggest re-strategizing. We get them to look for different jobs or get GED.... But this is not the case here. Tina: We're not seeing that here. I get "Tina, I want an office-y job like what you do." I say, "But I have a degree...." Dawn: We have those training for office jobs but they lack a GED and so even though they've learned the computer skills they're really not qualified for the jobs they've been training for. But this is a different struggle. Jenn: We're talking about the rare instance - that they are making a good faith effort but it really is the economy, they really are doing what they need to be doing but come up to those 8 months - but they're still not getting anything... or also regardless of the economy. Helene: But if word goes around (that we're making exceptions for some people) they'll all be wanting extensions. The next day, I'll have 2-3 calls: "I want one too." Nancy: 8 months (of search time if they get one extension) is a long time. I don't want them to mop floors but.... Tina: (interrupting): I mop floors. I went to the Career Center and found me a job cleaning offices. I'm not too proud to do that if it helps my son go to college. If I can do it.... Helene: I'm seeing people's hours get cut so that now they can only work part-time. Jenn: Let's be pro-active. I could see not wanting to give automatic extensions. But do we want to say when unemployment hits a certain level, this will be our reaction? Wendy: When factories start laying off... these are the jobs people live on. And part time will not be enough. Jenn: It's happening in the service industry too. Nancy: How does the committee feel? Jenn: There should be a qualifier. What qualifies as “bad economy”? 4% unemployment? 10%? Wendy: I'm sure it's different by region. I was in a Quartet meeting and the Unemployment (Insurance) people were there and were saying that even though the economy is going down, there are still jobs that welfare recipients could get. They could be our indicators. They're pretty aware, at least in Western Mass. Tina: I have the opposite problem of people having 6 jobs in 6 months. Jenn: Because of population density, it may be different in Boston. Tina: But transportation is different. Here, the trains and busses are not running at midnight. I hear what you're saying. But what else is going on? They are getting the slack of rent adjustment if the mill shuts down. They could be working at MacDonald's while they're upgrading their skills. I have a hard time saying that they couldn't find something to keep their housing. (continued on next page)
Excerpt 7.4 Discerning Effort in a “Bad Economy” (cont.)

Wendy: It’s a different skill. There’s the welfare mentality. And there’s the sense that when things get bad, the welfare system will help them out. I think we need to be teaching a new mentality. But the period when times get bad is also real and we need to recognize that. So we need to be pro-active.

Tina: But 8 months is a long time. (We can) be more empowering rather than rather than enabling them to feel bad for 6 months.

Nancy: But Jenn is talking about those that are doing what they can.... We need to think about our response... maybe a two month extension? ... Let’s look at this at the next meeting... Where are the Employment and Training programs referring people and what are they seeing? Where are they now referring? ... I know Mass Mutual is having lay offs and a hiring freeze because of 9-11.

Tina: I agree...

Nancy (continuing): Even airports, they’re getting stricter about who they are employing and our clients may not pass their security checks. Some exceptions to the rules (may be necessary) and where do we draw the line?

Wendy: If those with higher skills and more experience are losing their jobs, they’ll get hiring preference for low-skilled jobs and push the lower skilled out.

Jenn: We have a contact at WIA. I’m willing to do research....

though Tina’s personal experience supported her belief that it is feasible to combine menial labor with career building strategies, she agreed that JOBLink practice should aim to “empower” participants during the time they are striving to find employment.

Although the practitioners did not reach consensus about what to do about the conflict between the program goals and the current economic context, by the end of the discussion, forum members agreed to pursue Jenn’s proposal to research how they might “be proactive.” This research would identify additional sources of knowledge about the impact of the economic downturn from employment and training experts. And they committed to devising a “bad economy policy” that would allow them to adopt a generalized approach to contending with individuals’ struggles without compromising program goals or principles of fairness to participants who were in compliance or those on the wait lists to receive housing assistance. Rather than allow idiosyncratic precedents to shape de-facto policy, they would purposefully craft a new approach.

External Validation of the Economic Downturn: As it turned out, developments in the external environment made the practitioners’ effort to establish the magnitude of the economic downturn considerably easier. Just twelve days following the practitioners’ decision to research how they might devise a “Bad Economy Policy,” the National Bureau of Economic Research announced that the US economy had officially entered a recession. The announcement marked
the end to the longest-running expansion in US history and indicated to many economists that the
country’s fiscal climate had changed substantially since the boom that began in the early 1990s
(Nelson 2001). It was in that context of relative prosperity that the shift to work-first approaches
to welfare-reform and subsequent reports of declining welfare caseloads occurred. As discussed
in Chapter 2, critics of this approach to promoting self-sufficiency had long warned that the rapid
workforce attachment would be more difficult to maintain under tighter labor markets. And by
December of 2001, after months of rising unemployment, the impact of the recession on welfare
recipients became evident. On December 9th, the Massachusetts welfare department released the
news that cases had increased by 2,100 in September, the highest monthly increase since the
agency started keeping records in 1973 and as Claire McIntire, commissioner of the
Massachusetts welfare department acknowledged, “If the unemployment rate is up, we expect to
inch up... We are seeing it happen, no question” (Leonard 2001).

The practitioners brought this evidence of the economic downturn and its impact on welfare
receipt to the March 6, 2002 meeting of the forum to legitimate the impressions about the
questionable feasibility of complying with the program’s work requirements. They also
referenced reports of longer spells of joblessness, especially among low skilled workers followed
soon afterwards (Harrington 2001).

In addition to validating their earlier impressions about the necessity for a “Bad Economy
Policy,” references to other system actors’ responses to the recession helped the practitioners
formulate an alternative to established compliance practice. The practitioners’ discussion of the
state’s employment department’s decision to extend unemployment insurance benefits to job
seekers lent credence to the suggestion from the November meeting to extend the time frame for
JOBLink participants to devote to job search before being required to fulfill the requisite hours
of employment. So too did the mounting requests for extensions. The time pressures of
handling those requests and the growing awareness that the Career Centers were not sufficiently
equipped to assist JOBLink participants in finding work added to the practitioners’ sense of
urgency about the need to change the program regulations.

The practitioners closed their March meeting with a set of initial proposals to be submitted
to the JOBLink Steering Committee after further elaboration in subsequent meetings. In addition
to extending the time limit for job search, the practitioners requested that the Committee solidify
commitments from DTA and the career centers to offer more intensive case management to
program participants. They also referenced increasing appeals of termination decisions by legal service advocates as the rationale for more formally institutionalizing the practitioners’ previously approved job search activities of their GFE Policy as part of the binding program regulations.

Evolution of Theories-in-Use with Input from Program Participants: Shortly after the March meeting of the practitioner forum, the practitioners had an opportunity to discuss the implications of the economic downturn with a group of JOBLink participants. DHCD had dedicated its 2002 annual meeting with tenants in its programs to the two self-sufficiency programs. JOBLink participants clearly articulated their need for more time to find employment. They also suggested that pursuing educational opportunities and volunteer positions would be more conducive to their success in securing sustainable employment than merely fulfilling the work obligation.

As Excerpt 7.5 from the April 3, 2002 meeting immediately following the Participant Advisory Board meeting evidences, the practitioners’ discussions with the participants encouraged the practitioners to further expand their collective theories-in-use about how to motivate participants to make the transition from welfare to work within the framework of the JOBLink program. Previous creative practices and proposals rested on the practitioners’ emerging understanding that helping clients comply with the work requirement necessitates taking into account effort in addition to achievement, providing constructive feedback, and setting feasible time lines. The JOBLink participants’ suggestions invited the practitioners to consider developing clients’ capacity to find and maintain employment as an additional means to pursue the program’s self-sufficiency goals.

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3 The “Participant Advisory Board,” as DHCD terms these annual meetings, is a response to the requirement to allow resident comments on housing authorities’ annual plans enacted as part of the 1998 Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act. In the 2002 and 2003 meetings, DHCD targeted FSS and JOBLink participants and structured the day to elicit feedback on the programs.
Introducing capacity development as a program element was the most substantial deviation from the JOBLink program design the practitioners had entertained thus far. Whereas the proposed extension to the time limits altered the parameters of the official program design, allowing clients to pursue activities other than work, term job search, and short-term training entailed a modification of the program’s core theory of intervention. Early on, the practitioners had voiced their critiques of the program’s work-first approach to self-sufficiency and what many saw as the overly punitive emphasis on compliance enforcement. Now, in the context of the economic downturn and program participants’ clearly voiced requests, the practitioners had an opportunity to revisit their December 2000 decision to “wait and see.”

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<th>Excerpt 7.5 Reflections on the Annual Meeting with Residents (April 2002)</th>
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| Wendy: I thought it was great. (Others nod in agreement). One thing that came up: a man said that people go through training, but because they don’t have work experience, they can’t find work. He thought it would be helpful to do volunteer work to get experience and have it count as fulfilling the work requirement. ...  
Helena: That’s a good idea. But for how long?  
Wendy: We could do it on a case by case basis. ...  
Sharon: What would they live off of?  
Rachelle: I had a case of a JOBLink participant with one more semester to get her degree. If she could access volunteer services in accounting, it would help. But then DTA only pays for day care given work requirement, not for going to school.  
Sharon: It would be a nightmare (to implement). They could still work and go to college. Others do it without housing assistance.  
Rachelle: But it’s hard for those with barriers to make it all fit together. The voucher and (income support) allows them to really get ahead and leave assistance, including housing.  
Sharon: But should we pay for that? I’m working full time and going to school and have no one is helping me.  
Dawn: I think - if it’s temporary - not every time you do a job you do community service.  
Wendy: (clarifying). It would only be volunteering as experience that is relevant (for obtaining future work).  
Nancy: Last time we talked with Leslie about volunteer work for the disabled so that they could get some skills like working in hospitals. She said it should be time limited and related to work.  
Amelia: They should also be applying for jobs at the same time, showing a good faith effort.  
Wendy: But what if it’s (the educational program or volunteer position) full time?  
Jenn: Then we could call it an internship.  
Sharon: I have examples like that with CNAs. Often they’re hired on after a month.  
Tina: That’s how I got hired. I was an intern at BHSI.  
Nancy: HAP has hired temps.  
Rachelle: Can DHCD change the regs? Or does it have to be HUD? (Nancy will check.)  
Tina: We could get creative. What if they did training and then did an internship within the 4 months?  
I’d rather give 5 months to someone doing that than someone working McDonalds. Call it volunteering, internship, anything! |
Whereas in December 2000, the practitioners expressed their beliefs about promoting self-sufficiency, in April 2002, they deliberated about the feasibility and legitimacy of enacting such a change. The practitioners raised concerns about clients’ ability to make ends meet if they are not working and no longer eligible for income supports, the logistics of combining work and volunteering, the implications for already over-extended JOBLink staff, and how realistic it would be to convince HUD and DHCD of the value of broadening the requirement to include volunteering. To justify that the idea was feasible, they referenced examples from clients and their personal experience. To legitimate it as valuable in light of the program’s ultimate goals of promoting self-sufficiency, the practitioners pointed to authorization of similar exceptions for disabled participants. They also crafted their characterization of the proposal in terminology consistent with the work-first agenda. Like income supports under welfare reform, volunteering would be *temporary*; like work, volunteering would entail *experience*; and to further emphasize employment over mere community service, it could be called an *internship*.

This rationale led to consensus within the community of practice. It persuaded Sharon despite her initial reservations. And Tina’s enthusiasm expressed at the end of the excerpt marks a pronounced shift from her earlier commitment to the work-oriented self-sufficiency strategy. Moreover, at the close of this April discussion, the forum Chair remarked that the program participants’ articulation of the value of more intensive educational opportunities, volunteering, and additional case management support would help validate the proposal and even help secure the resources to make it more feasible:

*This is from the client's perspective. Now DHCD is hearing it from the horse's mouth. We've been saying it. When we were designing the program, I was saying ..., that we needed counseling. I appreciate that DHCD heard it directly from the clients. And they were the cream of the crop.*

*Summary of the Efforts to Respond Pro-actively to the Economic Downturn:* These discussions revealed the practitioners’ emergent understanding of the changing economic environment and its implications for their clients’ ability to meet the work requirements. Discussion about the mounting evidence of a recession and the group’s sense of urgency about the situation, triggered the quest for a unified “Bad Economy” policy and a progression from *fragmented* to *self-guided* mode of sensemaking. Although the practitioners initially expressed a range of views about the compliance-oriented program design and the severity of the labor
market trends, these discussions – and the input from other system stakeholders – brought forum members’ ideas about self-sufficiency into alignment. In the course of these discussions, practitioners reinforced their critiques of JOBLink’s incentive and sanctions approach to motivating clients to work to espouse a more robust theory-in-use of motivation that encompassed each of the components of FSS practice: specifying individualized goals, providing constructive feedback, and developing capacity to meet expectations in addition to discerning effort and incentives and sanctions.

The opportunity to deliberate with program participants proved particularly influential to the practitioners’ sensemaking. Program participants not only affirmed the practitioners’ assessment of the discrepancy between the expectations of the program designs and what was feasible given the implementation context; they also provided the seeds of ideas for creative solutions. The practitioners did not yet craft proposed alternatives from the existing repertoire of programmatic routines. Nor did they appeal to decision makers to formulate program changes based on their new understanding of the problems with the current design. Rather, they expressed their intention to design alternatives and their confidence that these diverse sources of legitimation would enhance their influence once they had a concrete proposal.

Applying the Theory-in-Use to Make the Program Better for Clients with Temporary Disabilities:
In the same time period, the practitioners did succeed in formulating and submitting their proposal to introduce the idea of substituting education and volunteering for the work requirement in the final version of their Temporary Disabilities Policy. The previous draft of the proposal formulated with the facilitation of Leslie, the DHCD Workforce Development Coordinator, the previous May had already afforded the practitioners authority to specify longer time frames for disabled JOBLink participants to return to work. The practitioners had also experimented with allowing participants who had become disabled after enrolling the program to use their extended transition period to pursue more extensive education and training than permitted in the JOBLink regulations with the aim of enabling them to qualify for jobs that are more suitable to their capabilities. Now they proposed a new type of practice to extend these changes to the entire sub-group.

The practitioners recognized that this new proposal would require even greater cooperation with health care and disability professionals to determine feasible work and training plans. To
address this challenge, they adapted an organizing structure familiar from FSS. They devised a Disabilities Experts Advisory Committee with a purpose similar to the FSS Program Coordinating Committee. Members of this committee were to advise JOBLink practitioners about individual clients’ capabilities as well as help with referral to the appropriate job training and supportive services. The practitioners stressed that the committee structure would also help address conflicts with clients’ advocates over the work requirements. As Sharon conveyed during this meeting: “I have advocates calling me to tell me that we're doing it the wrong way, that we’re forcing people to work. They’re attacking me and saying: ‘You're pressuring her and you'll throw her over the edge.’”

As in the previous draft of the disabilities policy in Phase 1, Leslie’s facilitation proved invaluable for guiding the sensemaking effort in the forum. Leslie suggested a formalization of this idea that emphasized the disabled clients’ protected legal status and importing additional elements of the FSS approach to JOBLink:

Here's a first take. If the person is shown to be disabled and gets some documentation, then she could ask for "reasonable accommodation" to substitute education for some work and/or reduce the work obligation for X amount of time. Those who do want to work can set up a longer term plan, and as long as they are in compliance with the plan, they're okay. I would like to see this be the process. It's kind of like FSS - a vocational plan. So far, I'd like to see this for disabled families. But we're not at a place in the agency where we could substitute education for employment.

Leslie agreed to include these revisions to the Temporary Disabilities Policy in the proposal for the next JobLink Steering Committee meeting. In response to the suggestion that other clients could benefit from education to “get better employment on the other end,” Leslie repeated that “We need to be very clear that this is only for the disabled, for ‘reasonable accommodation.’” She clarified that her experience with the FSS model and her personal preferences were in line with theirs, yet her role as the program administrator did not allow her to justify such a far reaching step away from the employment focus of the program. “At DHCD, there’s a high level of commitment to hold people to a firm work commitment. That’s not budging.”

Summary of Creative Practices for Doing the Right Thing in Phase 2:

The increasingly high stakes of termination, the time consuming termination process, and the escalating pressures of rising unemployment rates prompted the practitioners to devise creative practices to help clients meet increasingly challenging program expectations. Additional
input from clients, the legal service community, and the repertoire of practices from the Section 8 and FSS programs, helped legitimate modifications for the select group of disabled clients. In some cases, support from agency supervisors facilitated adoption of farther reaching changes to established routines. With guidance from the DHCD representative, the practitioners succeeded in revising core elements of the program design – not just for individual clients, one discretionary decision at a time – but for the entire sub-group of disabled clients.

These responses to the practice problems resulting from the conflict between the program design and the implementation environment employed existing routines from other programs to improve service to clients instead of rationalizing the resort to coping mechanisms. As opposed to routinization of complex tasks, each new practice entailed extra effort on the part of the practitioners. The practices aimed to improve interactions with clients rather than impose power or deflect blame. Nor did their efforts to set more feasible goals, provide constructive feedback, and afford capacity building pursuits explicitly single out particular clients. On the contrary, members of the discussion forum expressed their commitment to applying these practices uniformly, as part of ongoing practice. Nevertheless, the acknowledged shift in the economy and the legitimating input from system actors proved insufficient to extend educational opportunities to the entire clientele.

Phase 3: “JobLink at a Crossroads” – Making Sense of Opportunity and Sensemaking to Enhance Employability (March through October 2003)

In February of 2003, Leslie sent a memo to forum members entitled “JobLink at a Crossroads.” The memo documented the program’s successes over the first three years of operation and pointed to the dramatic challenges in the economic and policy environment that afford a window of opportunity for a new round of strategic planning. Despite the rising unemployment rates in the state, employment among JL participants had remained relatively stable at 80% of the clientele with an additional 11-12% in active job search. Twelve clients had “graduated” from the program after reaching incomes above the maximum limit for federal housing assistance and nearly a third of the clients were receiving additional case management to help them pursue their self-sufficiency goals through participation in FSS. These successes won DHCD’s program an award of 151 additional vouchers from HUD that established the program
as the largest Welfare-to-Work Voucher program in the country. In addition, JOBLink was featured as the “Welfare-to-Work Site of the Month” on HUD’s web-site.

This acclaim for JOBLink coincided with mounting external pressures on the program participants and staff. Unemployment rates continued to be substantially higher than they were at the time the program was adopted. Funding cuts were reducing openings in job training and re-employment programs. Despite the successes, these trends exacerbated the challenges of “Good Faith Effort” compliance; both terminations and suspensions of work requirements for those with extenuating circumstances rose significantly. (See Figures 7.3 a,b). Furthermore, the welfare department withdrew its commitment to funding the program in response to its own funding pressures and the fact that the majority of JOBLink clients were no longer within the mandate for welfare stabilization services. Consequently, resources for JOBLink case management became more scarce at a time when demand was escalating.

Change in program operations was now inevitable. The reduced influence of the welfare department and its commitment to the “work-first” philosophy of self-sufficiency meant even greater opportunity for far-reaching reforms to the JL program. Leslie’s memo presented this opportunity to the practitioners. It stated:

> With all of this in mind, our goal at this time is to consider how we can maintain, strengthen, change, and/or add JOBLink program policies and features in order to contribute to the housing stability and personal employment success of participants and the overall success and integrity of the program.

The memo closed with a series of questions for “response and brainstorming” in the forum’s next meeting. In addition to inviting the practitioners to think about what is critical to preserve and what they would like change, the memo referenced the concerns and suggestions voiced over the preceding forum meetings, including the practitioners’ previously proposed revisions to the employment obligation.

The following account of the four meetings from March 2003 to December 2003 examines how the practitioners responded to this opportunity to innovate – to make the program work better for the entire clientele. As the narrative shows, the process involved a progression from fragmented to guided sensemaking and points to the role of forum supporters in persuading practitioners that farther reaching creative practice is feasible. Despite the expressed commitment to developing a “proactive” policy for the “bad economy,” forum members initially hesitated to respond the invitation to innovate. Collective analysis of a concrete example and
guidance from Nancy, the forum Chair, and Leslie, the DHCD representative, helped the practitioners transform previous creative practices and proposals and one practitioner’s bold experiment into a proposal that would change the program’s emphasis on promoting employment to enhancing employability. By the end of this phase of program implementation, the forum produced a revised Good Faith Effort Policy that won buy-in from the entire community of practice and DHCD decision makers.

**The Forum’s Hesitation:** Although the practitioners had received Leslie’s memo that described the context and challenges as an opportunity for further developing their preliminary ideas for creative practices that had already been expressed in the forum, they did not begin the March 2003 meeting with the proposed brainstorming about ways to “strengthen, change, and/or add JOBLink program policies and features” suggested in the memo. Instead, the meeting commenced with the usual round of updates. The practitioners’ reports from the field substantiated Leslie’s depiction of the challenging context with accounts of their experiences in the three months since the previous meeting. Each practitioner recounted stories of layoffs, longer than usual job searches, competition with higher skilled and more experienced workers, lack of child care for the growing number of clients no longer eligible for post-welfare subsidies, and the decreasing availability of training opportunities. The group also devoted meeting time to offer one another suggestions about how to handle difficult termination cases.

Throughout the ensuing discussion, Nancy, the forum chair, and Leslie posed questions to the group to encourage them to share reflections about each facet of the program and their previous voiced ideas for improvements. They also reiterated the opportunity to direct a significant change in the direction of the program. As Leslie remarked: “The moment is now and the moment won’t last very long. We might not have this chance in a year.”

However, rather than the anticipated outpouring of new ideas, discussion revisited themes from previous meetings. The following quote from the meeting minutes captures the content and tone of the conversation: “We all agree that it is healthier for the whole family if the mother or head of household holds down a job. We need to keep helping families improve their social status and move away from the welfare way of life to a life of self-empowerment.” The first sentence of this quotation expresses the practitioners’ understanding of the value of employment that underlies the work-first approach of the program design. The second sentence asserts their equally strong conviction that making the transition to gainful employment requires substantially
more support than included in the compliance-oriented program design. Note that no qualifying adverb connects these two statements; the two theories of promoting self-sufficiency are simply juxtaposed without an indication of potential tradeoffs, tensions, or relative priorities.

Implicit in the practitioners’ discussion was the perspective that the work-first theory of the program and their own broader theories-in-use were mutually reinforcing rather than inherently in opposition. Excerpt 7.6 reflects this compatibility in two related respects. First, the practitioners contended that promoting work experience was consistent with supportive case management. In fact, they implied that the support they extended to their clients was vital not only for “staying on track”; it also helped them realize the less tangible gains from employment — their children’s respect and the ability to “not just accept what’s given to them” — that enhance the intrinsic motivation and capacity to become financially independent.

Excerpt 7.6: When Work Works: With Supports, For Some, Some of the Time

Dawn: When I think of JOBLink, it’s a program offered to help people who are trying and willing to make that transition from welfare to work. It’s about stabilization towards becoming more self-sufficient. The requirements were originally placed to make sure that they stay on track. Now it seems to be more punitive. But initially, they were there to help us and the client stay on track. I still think it’s a good goal. For certain families — those that do go to work and are trying to be self-sufficient, getting employed, and staying employed — I am seeing other issues getting settled. There is more stability. And kids are doing better. The JOBLink worker is helpful for those that are making that transition.

Helena: I agree. It really helps the families. I get calls from DSS after the mother starts working and they say that they were able to treat the kids better when the mom was not with them all the time.

Helena: I hear mothers saying that their kids respect them more.

Ruth: It sets a better example for the kids

Sharon: We want to get them not to just accept what’s given to them. Not to just do what we or DTA say.

Helena: But they need a lot of support. That’s what we do. We support them. Otherwise, three months down the line, they go back ... It’s like going to school; it takes a long time to graduate for a reason. The same here. They need that support. ...

Ruth: It helps them survive the period where it’s real scary.

Sharon: It’s a bridge between them and the DTA. Getting freed from that.

Ruth: Yeah. That’s about dependency. It takes a long time to get out. Also their parents were on

Secondly, the excerpted discussion implies that the practitioners saw work-first and learn-first as compatible because they understood the transition to work as a gradual process rather than a discrete event. They also conceived of their role in helping the clients move through that process as dependent on each client’s level of preparedness at any given point in time.
In short, instead of suggesting changes to the program, the practitioners suggested that work-first works, but it works better with the additional practice of more extensive case management.

Another way the practitioners resisted Nancy and Leslie's invitation to brainstorm about fundamental changes to the program was their initial reluctance to embrace the idea of reducing the reporting requirements so as to afford more time for case management. Forum members asserted that although compliance monitoring is time consuming, it is essential for identifying which clients require the additional motivational devices of specified goals, constructive feedback, and assistance in addressing the barriers that inhibit their efforts to comply.

This endorsement of the same regulatory devices the practitioners had previously found to be overly punitive suggests that the construction of creative practices for improving communication with clients from the regulatory resources of compliance monitoring procedures altered the practitioners' perspectives on the value of the original program design. In themselves, the coercive rules were seen as poor instruments for motivation. When used in the service of discerning clients' and encouraging efforts and directing practitioners' efforts to where it is most essential, however, they were perceived as an integral component of a more robust strategy.

In addition to their desire to continue to pursue their previous improvements to JOBLink practice, some forum members expressed their reluctance to consider farther reaching programmatic changes. They referenced Leslie's opening remarks about program success as a rationale for maintaining the status quo. Preferences for staying the course referenced each of the key actors involved: “Why would we want to make changes if it’s going so well?” “They (the participants) are just starting to get used to it.” “And I just got the Reps to understand!”

**Sharon’s Bold Experiment:** Only at the end of the meeting did the practitioners begin to entertain alternatives to their previously established practices. This more generative discussion was sparked by closer examination of Sharon's efforts to make more substantial exceptions for selected clients than the community of practice's operationalization of the program regulations afforded at that time. During the round of updates, Sharon explained that she had examined the employment histories of all her clients and saw a pattern of cycling through low-wage, dead end jobs in fast food restaurants and donut shops and felt an obligation to assist those who evidenced potential to break through that cycle. She granted exceptions to the Good Faith Effort agreement
to allow a few non-disabled clients to pursue education and training programs beyond the four-month maximum stipulated in the regulations. In her words:

I took a chance and monitored them closely and it worked. One went right into a computer training program. I told her that I am making an exception for her. If she fails, she is right back to where she was at the beginning. These were very young women with two children, each with a different father and they were very dependent on men. I saw a real chance for making a difference with them.

Rather than relying on a conviction that more intensive training would improve participants’ chances of finding more rewarding work, Sharon studied her records to select candidates to test whether the FSS approach adopted for disabled clients would work for others and committed to close tracking of their subsequent performance. Like the conversion of enforcement procedures into devices for improving communication with JOBLink participants described in Phase 2, Sharon’s experiment applied monitoring procedures to additional functions. As one practitioner described it, Sharon’s more extensive and purposeful compliance monitoring was a form of “research,” albeit with a very small sample of two.

Discussion returned to Sharon’s experiment in response to Leslie, Nancy, and Wendy’s prods for the practitioners to consider their own time constraints in addition to those of their clients. In espousing the need for both more supportive case management and continued compliance monitoring, the practitioners had not addressed the implications of clients’ escalating need for assistance, increased caseloads, and declining funding for staffing on the continued feasibility of their enacting their theories-in-use without more substantial programmatic changes. Seen in this light, Sharon’s experiment raised questions about how the practitioners would allocate their time under the anticipated new pressures and the opportunity to make more substantial changes to the program. Wendy couched the question of priorities in ethical terms:

That’s why I want to ask what’s the goal? We’ve been doing this for three years. Now we have an opportunity to figure out where to put our energy. If the goal is employment, then we must put time into those that are not employed. If the goal is to bring people up, to make positive steps in their lives, then we need a different level of case management. That’s a whole different goal. It’s in conflict. I love the idea of helping those who are already employed to do better. But do we have an ethical obligation to put more energy into those who are NOT working? We could do more hand holding. But where do we set our priorities?

One line of response reiterated the need for individualized attention to each client’s specific circumstances. As Sharon stressed, “You have to do both. They are all our people. We can’t pick out a certain group. Mentally, you want to put energy where you’re going to have success and succession. You need to mentally divide your time.” Helena specified this sentiment in
relation the proposed changes. She argued that changing the reporting requirements and granting extensions needs to be “very individualized because you can’t assume that it works for all of them in the same way.” Yet others, like Dawn, pointed to concerns about consistency: “I’m concerned that if we’re too flexible, it will be difficult to be consistent for all the clients. It may be because of how MBHP is and that we have large numbers. But we’ve been more strict. We try to be standardized.” Some practitioners embraced both perspectives. Sharon condoned flexibility to make individualized solutions, yet she also noted that clients too need a consistent message: “They really do need a regular set up… You can’t say Monday do this and on Friday change it.”

The debate evidences that recognizing the tension between client-agent and state-agent roles necessitates acceptance of the reality of finite resources. As much as the practitioners desire to serve every client, their capacity to do so is inherently limited. Indeed, as Helena’s idea of conducting workshops and helping with job search conveys, the practitioners wanted to hold on to an image of themselves as magnanimous change agents rather than narrowly focused case workers, even as time pressures made actualizing that possibility even more remote.

Although the March meeting ended without resolving these tensions and without the anticipated outpouring of new ideas to address them, the discussion of Sharon’s experiment put into sharper relief the tensions between serving each client and assuring accountability to the entire clientele and between work experience and pursuit of educational opportunities. It also elicited a few kernels of ideas for further exploration, including the suggestion to reduce the minimum work requirement from 17.5 hours per week to 15 hours so that weekend jobs would satisfy the obligation, at least until the job market improved and to substitute “other ways of improving their employability” such as finding suitable day care or improving their job skills for hours of employment.

**Guided Bricolage and Sensemaking and the Revised Good Faith Effort Policy:**

After the March meeting and in preparation for the forum’s May 14, 2003 meeting, Nancy convened members of the Rental Assistance Committee (RAC) and the forum’s two self-sufficiency coordinators who held semi-managerial positions for a telephone conference about the impact of the budget cuts on staffing the agencies and the implications for preserving the integrity of the JL program. Nancy then synthesized the Rental Assistance directors’ ideas for conserving staff resources with the gleanings from the practitioners’ March meeting and
presented them in the form of initial suggestions for policy reform in a memo to the forum members. The suggested reforms combined the directors’ knowledge of Section 8 procedures with the JOBLink practitioners’ theories-in-use of motivation and projections about what would survive scrutiny of legal service advocates.

These initial proposals structured the discussion over the following four meetings. With Nancy and Leslie’s facilitation, the discussion progressed from surfacing dilemmas to examining proposed solutions to the previously surfaced problems of insufficient staff resources and the program’s limited definition of self-sufficiency. By the end of this phase, the forum had generated a proposal that not only “made the program better” from the perspective of the community of JOBLink practice; it also won approval of DHCD and Steering Committee decision makers. The revised JOBLink regulations formally embraced the commitment to “enhancing employability” as well as promoting employment, as Dawn had expressed the contrast at the end of the March meeting. The proposed changes also struck a balance between standardization for the entire clientele and individualized attention to each participant and committed additional housing staff resources to the program to afford JOBLink practitioners more time for supportive case management.

With Leslie and Nancy’s facilitation, the group’s proposal employed the bricolage and sensemaking strategies to extend and formalize their earlier modifications of regulations for the sub-group of temporarily disabled participants to the entire clientele in ways that would resonate as legitimate to DHCD decision makers. The remainder of this section describes the components of the revised regulations. (See Table 7.1.)

Revised Contract of Participation: The new contract of participation extended the time frame for pursuing activities other than work to six months for all JOBLink participants and included the provision that participants could decline job offers that did not constitute “suitable employment.” As with the Temporary Disabilities Policy adopted the previous year, the practitioners modeled the extension after the Department of Employment’s extension of unemployment insurance benefits. In addition to drawing the parallel to established policies, the forum’s proposal stressed that the standardized extension would impact relatively few participants given that the overwhelming majority of clients were working; only 20% were not working and of those, only 2.5% were not complying with the GFE agreement even in its current formulation. Forum members also underscored that linking the GFE period to DET’s guidelines
would allow them to revert back to the shorter time frame when the economy improved. In addition to these external sources of validation, the practitioners substantiated the value of these changes with stories of clients’ struggles to find jobs and the limitations of available jobs for securing economic independence.

Forum members also emphasized that the changes in the contract would make complying with the work requirement more feasible. As one practitioner noted, “The deadline is not the motivation to work. They want to work. And it’s also luck. Knowing that they can have an extension is reassuring to the clients and I don’t think that we’ll see a drop (in compliance) as a result.” Forum members noted that the extended time period not only gave the clients more time for their effort to find work under the adverse conditions; it also allowed more time for clients to assemble the necessary documentation and for the practitioners to work with clients to identify and address impediments to employment. They also stressed that standardization would simplify preparation for termination cases and save time consuming conflicts with legal service advocates over the applicability of different time limits to each client.

Career Development Plan: The forum’s proposal for operationalizing the new contract of participation also built on their previous creative practice that applied the “FSS Approach” to temporarily disabled JOBLink participants. Substantively, the proposal re-interpreted the program’s goal to reflect the practitioners’ commitment to enhancing employability in addition to merely promoting employment. Participants would be allowed to pursue more extensive training and educational programs including college degrees and job-related volunteer service or internships.

Yet despite the practitioners’ conviction that developing job skills was essential for competing in the tight labor market and for securing the stable and rewarding positions that would ultimately lead to economic independence from social supports, the forum did not present its proposal as a change to the program’s original goals. Despite the Participant Advisory Board’s advocacy for education and volunteering, the anecdotal evidence from Sharon’s experiment with selected clients, the Steering Committee’s prior approval of extended re-training for temporarily disabled participants, and the reduced influence of the work-first oriented welfare department, the forum sensed that the state-level decision makers would still be reluctant to embrace such a far-reaching departure from the original conception of JOBLink’s goal. Following Leslie’s advice, the group decided to incorporate this broader, FSS-like theory of self-
I think we want to reframe this to say “expand the GFE.” Work is work. There are alternatives to employment that can be subsumed under the GFE … The GFE would now be about working, searching, going back to school, and volunteering in ways that are about career development as opposed to make-work, so that they are significant experiences that show they are making a good faith effort towards obtaining and maintaining employment. It still keeps work as a distinct and desirable requirement.

However, extending the good faith effort plan to allow clients to pursue four-year college degrees did not prove feasible for the practitioners. As Leslie clarified, in the current policy climate, they cannot make a major policy change; allowing clients leeway to pursue higher education would need to remain in the domain of individualized discretion.

I think – personally, me Leslie as a person – that it would be great. But the State is all over the philosophy that it’s two years. Two years and you’re off welfare, two years for education – and 4 only if you’re feeling more nice that day. The question is would we release them from the employment obligation for 4 years and still allow them to maintain the voucher? Yes, if they’re “highly motivated.” It’s a squishy term. If they’re in good standing, were employed before they went to school, give in their logs, … Two years of being steadily employed could be a condition for allowing them to pursue more education. But we can’t include that in the language. That would be too strong. But it could possibly meet the standards; nothing in the admin plan prohibits it. And I’d back you up.

The forum’s operationalization of this expanded Good Faith Effort commitment also drew from the FSS model as previously incorporated into their Temporary Disabilities Policy. For each client who was not fulfilling the work requirement, the practitioners would devise a Career Development Plan modeled after the FSS Individual Service and Training Plan. These plans would delineate specific and feasible employment goals for each client and chart a course of action for acquiring the requisite training and supportive services. This combination of individualized direction and standard practice not only won approval of DHCD and the JOBLink Steering Committee; it also served to resolve the debate among forum members over the appropriate balance between flexibility to be responsive to each client’s unique circumstances and uniformity with respect to the entire clientele.

Career Development Logs: In order to address the time deficit the expanded case management would entail for JOBLink practitioners, the forum proposed changes to their previously adopted creative practice of the Job Search Activity Logs. The new logs – termed
Career Development Logs – would include the newly accepted scope of allowable activities. Rather than require a standardized number of activities, each client would report on progress delineated in their individualized plan. The time savings would come from the reduced frequency of the reporting requirement and subsequent processing of the documentation.

This administrative practice also aimed to facilitate the increasingly difficult challenge of balancing accountability to the clients’ specific needs and accountability to the state’s regulations. The activity logs would supply documentation of the clients’ efforts to comply as well as, in the language of HUD regulations, their “willful and persistent” refusal to meet the expectations specified in their contract and plan in sufficient detail to alleviate the friction with legal service advocates over the interpretation of compliance.

Furthermore, the new proposal also addressed the practitioners’ reluctance to abandon the procedures they had developed to induce clients to come into the office for face-to-face interactions. In place of those mechanisms, the new proposal imported another procedure from standard Section 8 operations. Just as Section 8 tenants are required to meet with their Program Reps when they plan to move to a new apartment, JOBLink participants would be mandated to attend a one-on-one meeting to develop a Career Development Plan as soon as they were no longer employed.

*Expanded “Specialized Reps”:* The final component of the new proposal expanded the position of the “Specialized Reps” that some of the practitioners had devised to facilitate communication among Section 8 and JOBLink staff and to formalize a division of labor for managing the labor-intensive tasks of termination procedures. The Section 8 staff in this new role would now help monitor compliance with the work requirement so as to allow the JOBLink staff to devote more time to intensive case management.

This formalization of previously contentious inter-programmatic cooperation proved feasible in the context of Section 8 budget cuts. Not only were the administrative fees from the JOBLink program a more crucial source of revenue to the housing agencies; the fact that the regular Section 8 staff were no longer devoting as much time to issuing new vouchers meant that they had more time to direct to JOBLink support.

*Summary of Creative Practices for Making the Program Better in Phase 3:*

The revised JOBLink regulations adopted after this third phase of implementation expanded JOBLink from a program that emphasized compliance with work obligations to one that also
encouraged clients’ efforts to become self-sufficient. With the help of Nancy’s mediation with the Rental Assistance directors and Leslie’s communication with DHCD decision makers and both of their facilitation, the proposal synthesized the practitioners’ previously adopted and proposed creative practices to incorporate each of the elements of the JOBLink practitioners’ theories-in-use about motivating clients to make the transition from welfare to work. In addition to the incentives and sanctions of the original program design, JOBLink practice now called for discerning participants’ efforts to comply with the work requirements, delineating specific goals to direct progress, providing constructive feedback on efforts to reach the goals, and fostering development of participants’ capabilities to do so. While the practitioners were not able to change the regulations to allow participants to pursue four year college degrees and although the changes were couched as formalized exceptions rather than new goals, these departures from the work-first orientation of the program marked a substantial departure from the original policy design.

To craft many of these creative practices, the practitioners exercised the strategy of bricolage; the procedures and organizing structures were constructed from the existing repertoire of Section 8, FSS, and other social service administrative routines and structures to the JOBLink context. In addition to calling attention to the familiarity of these practices, the practitioners legitimated their modifications to the regulations by addressing the perspectives of each of the key stakeholders in the system of JOBLink governance. The practitioners balanced DHCD and DTA state officials’ endorsement of work-first approaches to self-sufficiency with their emerging understanding of clients’ need for additional supports. The clients’ collective expression of their interest in pursuing education and volunteering together with advice from the legal service community served to bridge the gap between the practitioners’ roles as state-agents and client-agents.

Developing and refining this cluster of creative practices was a product of the practitioners’ deepening comprehension of the necessity for farther-reach changes to JOBLink practice, their understanding of what those changes should look like, and their recognition of the window of opportunity to persuade decision makers to authorize their ideas. The components of the proposal built on forum members’ creative practices devised and adopted in previous phases of JOBLink implementation (yet another form of bricolage). Yet the formation and articulation of the proposal depended on the forum’s external leadership for encouragement, assistance in
processing initial ideas into formalized proposals, facilitation of the subsequent deliberation about how to refine the proposals, and ultimately the mediation and negotiation with decision makers.

Thus the package of proposals was a product of *guided sensemaking*, with Leslie and Nancy at the helm, the practitioners with managerial responsibilities in critical roles, and other forum members as active contributors yet not predominant direction setters. The creative process revealed and engaged the hierarchy beyond and within the forum. But the narrative also indicated that the leaders’ invitation to reform JOBLink policy was not in itself sufficient to convince several of the forum members that their valued practices for “doing the right thing” were not sustainable and were only questionably fair to the entire clientele. Nor were the “JOBLink and a Crossroads” memo and presentation sufficient to convince the practitioners that it was now feasible for them to do much more to actualize their conviction that improving employability was a better goal than merely promoting employment.

The resistance to efforts to guide sensemaking in the forum did not stem from a preference for a lighter burden of obligations or a more simplistic interpretation of expectations. On the contrary, the practitioners sought to take on more than what was feasible in light of pending budget cuts. Nor was their desire to hold on to the ambiguity of the established practices and the accompanying discretion to make situational adjustments couched as a means to wield power over clients. Rather, their inclination to maintain the status quo reveals their commitment to serve their clients and their inclination to protect their capacity to do so even if they are not able to help everyone.

It is this quality of productive resistance that prompted their fragmented sensemaking in response to Leslie’s invitation to brainstorm about more radical changes. The accounts this discussion produced were multiple, relatively narrow, and disconnected and their proposed actions were inconsistent with the new budgetary context. Also of note is the observation that fragmented sensemaking became generative only when questions from external and internal forum leaders prompted further examination of the specifics of Sharon’s experiment. Community of practice members’ envisioned scenarios about the implications of taking the experiment to scale are what sparked the discussion about the tension between the priority of individualized attention to each client and concerns about consistency.
The metaphor of midwifery captures the relationship of the external leaders and the practitioners in producing this final set of creative practices. Although Leslie and Nancy’s attention, expertise, and influence were essential, the program improvements could not have come to fruition without the practitioners – in their maternalist rather than paternalist roles. The story leading to the cluster of proposals suggests that the seeds of ideas the practitioners collected in the course of practice -- and particularly from communication with clients – needed to gestate. And the practitioners’ collective labor of deliberation together was the final push to refine the proposals to meet the group’s expectations for good self-sufficiency practice and so that they would be feasible in practice.

Epilogue: Short Stabilization Followed by HUD’s Phase-Out

In the following meeting in October of 2003, after DHCD and the reduced-form of the Steering Committee had approved their package of reforms, the practitioners shared experiences of how the improvements were working. They recounted stories about how the plan was a time saving alternative to termination procedures, how it was improving relationships with clients, and how some clients were already proving its success. With their reforms in place, the forum decided to devote upcoming meetings to discussing difficult cases with one another to “learn from each others’ behavior.”

By the following March, however, HUD had announced the phase-out of the Welfare-to-Work Voucher Program. In the few subsequent meetings of the JOBLink forum, much of the focus was on how to proceed with the phase-out. Plans to refine a “graduation” policy that would have allowed participants who had stabilized their employment to free-up slots for new participants were now being piloted in the larger agencies with the intention of permanently reducing the caseloads.4 While JOBLink practitioners were still committed to the new GFE agreement and to devising individualized plans with remaining clients, the directive to convert all disabled clients to regular Section 8 vouchers to lighten the monitoring load was consuming the majority of case management time.

Furthermore, an additional round of Section 8 budget cuts threatened the newly established division of labor once again. Because the ensuing uncertainty about Section 8 resources consumed much of the forum Chair’s time, the forum met only twice in 2004. These pressures

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4 Graduation and the subsequent influx of new participants would have re-established the connection with the welfare department and revived the possibility of future funding for the program.
also led the Rental Assistance Committee to consolidate the FSS and JOBLink sub-committees into a single discussion forum that would meet quarterly rather than bi-monthly. By the February 2005 joint meeting with the FSS forum, budget cuts had reduced self-sufficiency staffing for both programs and the practitioners were once again grappling with how to define feasible expectations of themselves and of the practitioner discussion forum under new, externally imposed conditions.

These external changes proved to be beyond the capacity for creative street-level practice, even with guidance and support.

7.2 Comparative Analysis of the Creative Practices of Group Activities and the “Good Faith Effort” Policies

Keeping clients motivated was among the major challenges facing both FSS and JOBLink practitioners. Neither program equipped the practitioners with direct lines to potential employers, a budget for training and supportive services, or even a clearly delineated technology for motivating clients. Moreover, the practitioners of both programs sought to make the programs work from the street-level of the same agencies that have little or no experience in people changing work and that view self-sufficiency as tangential to their core missions of providing safe and affordable housing.

In some respects, the JOBLink practitioners faced a greater challenge than their FSS counterparts. The compliance-oriented, work-first program design was farther from what the practitioners came to see as the appropriate motivational strategy than was the more encouraging, human development model of FSS. The practitioners also had far less discretion to depart from JOBLink’s compliance monitoring regulations than did the practitioners in the more flexible FSS program. The JOBLink practitioners were also beholden to a larger number of decision makers. They were directly accountable to the welfare department and the Steering Committee in addition to their agencies and DHCD and employers, job training program staff, healthcare professionals, and legal service advocates had more influence on how they discerned appropriate action.

In other respects, the FSS practitioners’ challenges were more substantial. Although they enjoyed more discretion, FSS was an even lower priority for their agencies than was the JOBLink program that brought in additional revenue and, because it included administering housing assistance, was more closely aligned with the core mission. Nor were the consequences
of failing to sustain FSS clients’ enthusiasm for striving towards self-sufficiency as high as they were for JOBLink clients who faced eviction for failure to comply with the requirements. This more peripheral position gave the FSS practitioners the advantage of greater autonomy to do as they saw fit, both in their individual practices and within the forum. At the same time, this autonomy meant that the practitioners enjoyed less support than their JOBLink counterparts. Although the Rental Assistance Directors sponsored both practitioner discussion forums, the FSS forum received less attention and guidance from the liaisons to the higher-level decision makers.

Despite these differences, practitioners of both programs sought to address the challenges of motivating their clients in ways that improved ongoing self-sufficiency practice. In both programs, the practitioner discussion forums proved to be venues for affirming and sharing creative responses to common challenges, analyzing emergent problems, and generating potential solutions. And both forums allowed the practitioners to make even farther reaching departures from established routines than they could pursue on their own. This finding suggests that creative street-level practice is feasible in the context of a range of program designs and management environments.

Yet these differences between the program designs and the management contexts also influenced the scope of creative practice in terms of the extent of the departure from official program designs and the practitioners’ assessment of their value. They affected how the practitioners employed the strategies of bricolage and sensemaking to design, legitimate, and enact their creative practices. The differences between the programs and the relation of external actors to the forums also impacted the dynamics of creative practice -- how the practices evolved over time in relation to changes in program lifecycle and implementation environment.

This comparison of creative street-level practice conveyed in the narratives of the FSS group activities and the evolution of the JOBLink Good Faith Effort policies addresses each of these influences in turn. The primary aim of this comparison is not to discern which creative practices were most impressive.\(^5\) Nor do I intend to ascertain whether flexible or regulatory policy designs are more conducive to creative street-level practice. Rather, the comparison is useful for further illuminating how the street-level practitioners employ the strategies of bricolage and

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\(^5\) Given the subjective and contingent nature of creativity (Amabile et al 1996), there are no comparable measurements for the scope of the departures from accepted routines of each program or the extent of the value attributed to them.
sensemaking to improve ongoing practice and what conditions make their efforts to do so more feasible.

**Valued Departures From Official Program Designs:** Both the group activities for FSS participants and the new procedures for discerning and strengthening JOBLink clients’ efforts to meet the employment goal fit the definition of *creative street-level practice* as departures from the official program designs that add value to ongoing practice. Both introduced entirely new modes of working with clients to promote self-sufficiency that were not included in the official program designs. Yet only in JOBLink did the practitioners actually change official directives. The JOBLink design not only had more regulations to modify; the practitioners needed to change the regulatory devices of the incentives and sanctions in order to embrace additional modes of motivating their clients.

None of these efforts came close to fully solving the problem of keeping clients motivated. The peer support groups, workshops, and retreats helped at least some FSS clients’ acquire valuable life skills and improve their self-confidence, but they did not entirely remove the stigma of having received public assistance. Nor did they influence the root causes of discrimination, prejudice, and low self-esteem. Even with the help of the Good Faith Effort reforms, the practitioners continued to struggle to keep JOBLink clients focused on their route towards improved employability. Nor did the reforms reverse the employment trends that made it hard for the less experienced clients to find jobs after participating in training programs.

Yet demonstrating results and resolving structural barriers is not the only way to assume responsibility for improving practice. Indeed, like the practitioners’ conception of motivation that emphasized efforts towards goals as opposed to achievements, the idea of creative street-level practice concerns progress towards intended outcomes. Moreover, in the definition of creative practice employed throughout this dissertation, the assessment of the value of the practice is determined by the practitioners themselves and the other actors whose opinions they deem essential to that judgment.  

The practitioners did not conduct tests of their theory of motivation or of their strategies for motivating clients to establish the value of their creative practices with social scientists’ objectivity. Rather, their assessment about what works in practice and validation by key system

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6 Recall from the discussion in Chapter 1 that this inherently subjective definition derives from a large body of work on creativity in social and organizational psychology, especially that of Teresa Amabile and scholars working with her or in reference to her work.
stakeholders informed their *practical judgment* concerning the value of their improvements. For the FSS practitioners, the test of practice was the predominant mode of assessment. Attendance at the events, client surveys, and forum members’ discussions about the value of group activities guided their decisions to adopt, adapt, or ultimately abandon the model. Like their FSS counterparts, JOBLink practitioners’ assessment of the value of their modifications to procedures emphasized the feasibility of implementation rather than client outcomes. This focus was, in part, the product of the compliance orientation of the program. The flow of documentation resulting from their job search logs, form letters, and practices for communicating with clients and partners aimed to identify the obstacles to compliance rather than increase employment rates.

Unlike the FSS practitioners, the JOBLink practitioners had administrative data in addition to their impressions of what works. Yet the figures on program non-compliance and termination rates and the state unemployment data primarily served to justify the need to change procedures rather than to evaluate the practitioners’ alternatives. Similarly, they referenced steady employment rates as evidence that their proposals to introduce education and internship opportunities would divert only a relatively small number of participants from the work obligation; they did not propose to examine the impact of their creative practices on future employment or earnings rates. Sharon’s small-scale experiment was the only example of efforts to assess the causal effects of their changes to program designs on client outcomes.

This focus on convincing decision-makers of the legitimacy of their changes to official procedures was far more critical to creative practice in the JOBLink context. Whereas the FSS practitioners rarely mentioned actors other than members of the community of practice, the JOBLink forum drew on the expertise from a broad range of stakeholders including mental health experts, legal service advocates the Department of Employment, and the Participant Advisory Board in addition to the DHCD and Steering Committee decision makers to legitimate their improvements.

This comparison suggests the degree of regulation and flexibility shapes the contours of accountability that define good practice and determine what qualifies as creative. Yet both types of program designs also rely on knowledge from practice and practical judgment to determine the feasibility of putting the creative ideas into practice.

**Bricolage as a Strategy for Creative Practice:** Both the group activities and the Good Faith Effort reforms evidence that street-level practitioners are entrepreneurial bricoleurs. The agency-
specific group activities and the retreat employed models of interaction common in the repertoire of FSS and other social service programs. Yet the fact that these practices were brought to the service of sustaining clients’ motivation was not explicitly articulated in forum discussions. Similarly, some of the initial JOBLink innovations shared among forum members imported Section 8 administrative procedures without overtly acknowledging the origins that were ingrained in their colleagues’ familiar vocabulary of action.

JOBLink bricoleurs also adapted the procedures and structures they borrowed from other administrative contexts. Such reconfiguration of routines, as in the conversion of hearings into modified case management opportunities, were discussed extensively in forum meetings. The adoption of the routines and structures of the “FSS Approach” was the most pronounced form of bricolage as a deliberate strategy for designing and legitimating creative practices. The fact that JOBLink practitioners engaged in this type of bricolage more frequently than their FSS counterparts is not surprising given the treasure trove of closely aligned Section 8 procedures and the panoply of FSS practices as materials available for recombination.

The art of bricolage is inherently haphazard, so the abundance of materials fuels the craft. But the examination of street-level bricolage through the lens of the forum discussions suggests that additional factors influence how available tools are put to new uses. The practitioners tended to seek out novel ways of recombining components of practice when they gained clarity about what they were seeking to achieve. For example, program participants’ desires to pursue education and internships expressed at the PAB meeting was among the triggers for the adaptation of the “FSS Approach” to JOBLink. The discovery of the Department of Employment’s model of extensions for unemployment insurance disbursements followed the practitioners’ realization that that many clients needed more time to find jobs.

In other cases, the materials themselves presented opportunities for creative practice. The workshops and conferences were alternative forms of group-oriented client service that easily filled the place of the more intensive peer support groups and two-day retreat when they were no longer considered feasible. Somewhat similarly, the FSS individual service plan influenced the shape of the creative practice for introducing the opportunity for education and other interim goals to the Temporary Disability and Good Faith Effort Policies.

Each of these processes for employing bricolage as a strategy for creative practice involved developing understanding (sensemaking) and influencing action (sensegiving) on the part of
forum members, and in some cases, other stakeholders. Most simply, the diffusion of the practices constructed from other routines necessitated the chance for forum members to hear about them. On the other end of the spectrum, adapting the “FSS Approach” depended on the practitioners’ emergent understanding of the inadequacies of the exclusively compliance-oriented program design, the desirability of technologies to improve employability in addition to promote employment, and the insight that the FSS design had something to offer for crafting and legitimating the alternative. Forum members did much of this sensemaking work on their own, yet Leslie’s guidance proved critical to the incorporation of the FSS Approach. Thus both the procedure-rich JOBLink design and the support the JOBLink forum gained from the DHCD representative were more conducive to street-level use of bricolage as a strategy for creative practice.

**Sensemaking as a Strategy for Creative Practice:** My adaptations of Sally Maitlis’ taxonomy of forms of sensemaking proved useful for analyzing how the practitioners engaged in the strategy in the discussion forums. As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, I decided to focus this exploration of street-level sensemaking on the group activities and Good Faith Effort reforms because they involved discussions that embody the process characteristics of animation and control that Maitlis attributes to high levels of sensemaking. With a few noteworthy exceptions, each of the discussions involved an intensive, interactive flow of information and interpretations among forum members that continued over an extended time period. Although the forums differed with respect to the roles of external leaders and the various discussion varied with respect to the quality of self-leadership, both the FSS and JOBLink discussion forums met regularly and convened the same group of practitioners.

Sensemaking was decidedly more controlled in the JOBLink forum, especially when the DCHD and RAC liaisons (Leslie and Nancy) played active roles and where the practitioners relationships with external leaders of DHCD and the Steering Committee proved influential. Across the two programs, the discussions described in the narratives varied with respect to the quality of the accounts of practice problems and potentially creative solutions and in relation to the actions that followed these accounts. In my application of Maitlis’ framework, I paid attention to the perceptions, interpretations, and ideas expressed in the discussions and the extent to which forum members arrived at agreement. In comparing actions, I focused on the extent to which they were consistent with forum members’ theories-in-use and -- following my definition
of creative practice -- the extent to which they entailed ongoing activity as opposed to discrete events. I also added a dimension of whether the forum members pursued the actions independently, adopted standardized guidelines for actions, or engaged in collective action as a result of the sensemaking process.

My characterization of each segment of the extended narratives of the creative practices adapted Maitlis’ taxonomy of sensemaking forms based on these process factors of animation and control and the outcome factors of the quality of the accounts and actions. I found a wide range of sensemaking forms. (See Table 7.1.) On one end of the spectrum of the degree of control, was the restricted sensemaking of the discussion about clarifying the eligibility regulations in the start-up phase of JOBLink implementation. On the other end of this spectrum was guided sensemaking where the DHCD and RAC liaisons tightly facilitated forum discourse about the Temporary Disability Policy and the final version of the Good Faith Effort Policy. Both of these types of sensemaking occurred only in JOBLink forum discussions. Supported sensemaking, where the liaisons supported forum members’ efforts to standardize their use of the Job Sarch Logs to formulate the first Good Faith Effort policy, was also exclusive to JOBLink discussions.

Examples of each of the other forms of sensemaking were common in both forums. Sensemaking was self-guided when forum members sought to reach agreement about an understanding of a problem or the value of a proposal and decided to pursue the same action, either collectively or according to a community of practice standard. Discussions for planning the retreats and reaching the decision to investigate a pro-active “Bad Economy Policy” used this form of sensemaking. When members did not find or seek agreement, sensemaking was fragmented. This was the most common form of sensemaking in both forums. Finally, the abandonment of the annual retreat and the discussions following HUD’s phase out of JOBLink involved minimal sensemaking; discussion was neither controlled nor animated and actions involved compromises or the coping gesture of inaction.

This classification is useful not only to elucidate the range of conceptualization and persuasion that forum deliberation generated. It also furthers assessment of the extent to which sensemaking is feasible for street-level practitioners in different contexts. Previous research has suggested that the extent to which organizational actors engage in the tasks of deepening understanding and influencing action depends on the actors’ capacity to construct and articulate
persuasive accounts of the world and their sense of the importance or urgency of addressing the problem (Maitlis and Lawrence 2007). Table 7.2 classifies the discussions featured in the narratives of this chapter according to each of these dimensions.

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<td>Unified or Formally Institutionalized Creative Practices</td>
<td>Getting Rules Right or Doing the Right Thing for Individuals</td>
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<td>Final Good Faith Effort Policy, Temporary Disability Policy - guided sensemaking</td>
<td>Clarifying JOBLink eligibility regulations - restricted sensemaking</td>
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<td>FSS Retreat - self-guided sensemaking</td>
<td>Initial reluctance to brainstorm about JOBLink at a Crossroads - fragmented sensemaking</td>
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<td>1st Good Faith Effort Policy - supported sensemaking</td>
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<td>Peer support groups and workshops (initially), Job Search logs, communication procedures - fragmented sensemaking</td>
<td>Abandonment of the retreat, JOBLink phase-out, peer support groups and workshops (for some) - minimal sensemaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad Economy discussion - fragmented then self-guided</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These terms are adapted from Maitlis and Lawrence 2007.

The lower right cell of Table 7.2 is the most obvious; the low levels on both dimensions correspond with relatively less extensive sensemaking. The FSS practitioners did not perceive the continuation of the retreat as a top priority and the JOBLink practitioners did not feel responsible for making improvements to a program that was being phased out. Deliberative capacity was low because altering circumstances to make action more feasible – and thus potentially a higher priority – was beyond the scope of their discretion and because of changes made in the structure of each forum at that time.

Where both discursive ability and responsibility were high, in the upper left corner of the table, sensemaking was relatively controlled and generated new ideas that were ultimately institutionalized formally or informally across the community of practice. How these discussions were controlled varied. The forum liaisons’ sense of urgency about preserving administrative fees, protecting the rights of disabled, and taking advantage of the opportunity to enact practitioners’ theories-in-use of self-sufficiency influenced their contributions to forum.
deliberations. Their support augmented the group’s capacity to synthesize concerns and previous creative practices and initial ideas and to deliberate together to refine the package of proposals. This high discursive ability and high responsibility cell also includes examples of practitioner leadership, both where external facilitation helped the practitioners discover the common denominator to formulate job search standards and where the practitioners reached consensus about retreat plans.

The upper right cell of the table contains examples of sensemaking where external actors lent their facilitation skills and expertise to the forum while the practitioners did not perceive that they held responsibility for illuminating or improving practice. The resulting discussions focused on simply clarifying regulations in the case of the JOBLink start-up discussion and the practitioners’ initial preference for the freedom of ambiguity when they resisted the invitation to brainstorm about more radical reforms even though they would ultimately make their obligations more feasible to manage.

The final cell exemplifies the circumstances where the practitioners felt responsible for addressing the problem yet lacked the capacity to fully understand or act on their understanding. For example, although the practitioners agreed about the principle of taking the initiative to address the challenges of the economic downturn, they initially lacked sufficient knowledge about the trends or the practices of other agencies to formulate a unified account of the situation or propose a plan of action. In other examples, the practitioners shared a commitment to addressing the practice problems and recognized that they were the only ones likely to do so even if they did not perceive the need to act jointly or in similar ways. The forum had sufficient discursive ability to disseminate their creative practices for independent adoption. However, several members of the community lacked the capacity to persuade the relevant actors to adopt the suggestions. Some FSS practitioners were unable to persuade clients to participate in the group activities and some JOBLink practitioners could not persuade agency directors to adopt the model of Specialized Reps.

This analysis suggests that the practitioners’ sense of responsibility — even if bounded — is the most important condition for fostering creative sensemaking; it does not occur when they do not feel responsible. Their sensemaking efforts are more likely to lead to creative practices that add substantial value when their sense of responsibility is combined with the capacity to deliberate, whether on their own or with guidance from others. Yet the practitioners’
sensemaking can also yield incremental increases in understanding and influence, even when their capacity to deliberate is minimal. This incremental facet of street-level sensemaking is the topic of the next section.

The Dynamics of Creating Value: The extended time frame of the narratives of these forum discussions affords insights into the dynamics of creative street-level practice. The creative practices each forum generated changed over time. Some developed incrementally, building on early practices as in the case of the addition of expert-led workshops to the peer support groups and the retreat and in the construction of the final Good Faith Effort Policy from previous practices. Others modeled subsequent creative practices with broader reach; the agency-specific peer support groups were models for the annual retreat and the practitioners adopted features of the Temporary Disabilities Policy to alternatives to work for the entire clientele.

Many of the creative practices were institutionalized as extensions to the program designs. For years, the group activities and the annual retreat were core features of FSS practice among forum members. However, because they were elements of the community of practice’s informal repertoire rather than officially sanctioned additions to program regulations, they were relatively easy to alter or abandon. In contrast, most of the creative practices to improve compliance with the JOBLink work requirement and develop clients’ capacity to find suitable employment were officially codified with the approval of decision makers. This difference is another consequence of the relative flexibility of the FSS designs and the greater stake agency directors and DHCD officials held in JOBLink’s outcomes.

These differences in the program designs and practitioners’ decision-making autonomy are also evident in how changes in the implementation environment influenced creative practice. Stakeholders and events in the external environment influenced how the JOBLink practitioners pursued, legitimated, and adapted their creative practices more than they affected the group activities of FSS. FSS practitioners revised their practices in response to observed changes in their value and the reactions of their partners. They also analyzed these changes in light of the new policy context of welfare reform. However, changes in the environment did not open windows of opportunity for more dramatic improvements to practice as they did in JOBLink. The flexibility of the official designs and the relative autonomy of the forum allowed the FSS
practitioners to adapt practice to changing context without the necessity of a “chaotic burst” (Drazin et al. 1997).

Other external events had such a strong impact on self-sufficiency practice that street-level practitioners could not respond to them creatively. HUD’s decision to phase-out the JL program effectively counteracted many of the GFE reforms. The practitioners were directed to reduce their case loads rather than do as much as possible for each client. With minimal funding for staff and no possibility of enrolling new clients, the impetus to improve the program waned.

Similarly, the uncertainty over the continuation of the FSS program in the face of budget cuts and HUD’s block grant proposal discussed in Chapter 3 reduced the practitioners’ motivation to pursue new approaches to improving the program. This climate of uncertainty prompted a wave of resignations in both programs. Some creative practices already in the community’s repertoire fell out of active use and the newcomers may need some time to learn about basic program operation before they embark on new improvements and creative projects.

Another difference in the dynamics of creative practice in the two forums pertains to the theories-in-use. The practice of convening group activities evolved despite the relatively constant conviction among forum members that the sharing experiences with peers on an ongoing basis contributed to clients’ sense of self-worth and self-efficacy and sustained their motivation to surmount the challenges of pursuing self-sufficiency. In contrast, the JOBLink practitioners’ theories of motivation evolved over the course of practice, in response to their experience with practice problems that emerged as a result of the progressive phases of program implementation and changes in the economy and budgetary environment.

As the far right column in Table 7.1 illustrates, the practitioners added elements to their ideas about how to motivate clients with each subsequent set of creative practices. The practices that allowed them to get the regulations right added the emphasis of discerning clients’ efforts to comply with the requirements to the program design’s focus on awarding incentives and enforcing sanctions. The novel practices for doing the right thing for individual clients aimed to set specific and feasible goals for each client, and provide constructive feedback. The practices that adopted the FSS approach to make the program designs better also sought to expand clients’ capabilities to reach the goals, and in some respects, to develop their self-esteem.
7.3 Conclusion

This examination of the self-sufficiency practitioners’ efforts to motivate their clients’ to make the transition to economic independence suggests that creative street-level practice is feasible. The practitioners were not only committed to serving their clients; they consistently took on additional work to improve their practice. Rather than merely cope with the limitations of the program designs, the practitioners developed more robust theories-in-use of motivation. They evidenced the capacity to employ the strategy of bricolage to extract new value from the “latent potential” of existing administrative procedures and structures to enact these approaches to motivation. And they engaged in sensemaking to deepen their understanding of the problems with the designs (and sometimes their creative practices) and potential solutions to those problems as well as to persuade other stakeholders and their peers to legitimate their creative practices and help them bring them to fruition.

In these efforts, the practitioners were responsive not only to their clients and the policymakers and state administrators who represent the public interest; they also engaged in the task of discerning what was appropriate in the eyes of other stakeholders and in light of changes in the economic and policy environment. They took on responsibility for more than adjustments to particular situations involving individual clients; they aimed to improve ongoing practice so that it furthered their more expansive interpretation of program goals.

Participation in the discussion forums enhanced the practitioners’ capacity to use bricolage and sensemaking creatively. The forums afforded the diffusion of individual practitioners’ creative practices among the members. Deliberating together about practice problems and possible solutions deepened their understanding of what was desirable and feasible. Their collective voices helped them influence the opinions and actions of decision makers and other system actors and their concerted efforts expanded their capacity to further develop their creative practices.

Where the forums received more support to facilitate discussions, supplement knowledge from practice, and fortify their skills of bricolage and sensemaking, creative practice was more substantial and more likely to be institutionalized as formal changes to official program designs. Liaisons to the forums also encouraged members to push for farther reaching improvements to practice. At the same time, analysis of the narratives evidenced that in the absence of such
supports, the freedom to experiment and innovate allowed the practitioners to adopt novel practices and to abandon them when they felt they no longer served their intended purposes.

Finally, the analysis of these discussions over extended time periods surfaced some evidence that the forums do for the practitioners what the practitioners have done for their clients. Forum members seem to motivate one another to keep up the effort of self-sufficiency work and to continue to pursue creative improvements to this work in the face of numerous obstacles. To venture a preliminary conjecture, forum members acknowledge one another’s efforts, set goals that are both challenging and feasible, adjust the goals through constructive feedback, develop one another’s capacity to make the efforts pay off, and boost their sense of self-worth as members of a community of practitioners dedicated to improving practice.

The loss of momentum around the retreat and following HUD’s decision to phase out the JOBLink program supports this assessment by way of counter-argument. I examine this conjecture in greater depth with reference to the practitioners’ responses to each of the practice problems and all three of the discussion forums in the concluding chapter of the dissertation.
PART III: THE FEASIBILITY OF CREATIVE STREET-LEVEL PRACTICE
CHAPTER 8
Conclusion: The Feasibility of Creative Street-Level Practice

Lessons from the FSS and JOBLink practitioner discussion forums suggest that it is possible for public servants who lack authority and resources to contribute to the work of governance. Those who work on the frontlines of public serving bureaucracies can and do seek to understand and follow program directives. They also address the challenges of implementation by devising creative alternatives to official guidelines and established ways of working that aim to improve program operations and designs. They employ strategies of collaboration, brioclage, and sensemaking to take advantage of available resources in the implementation environment. They strive to discern the value of their novel approaches to practice and persuade other system actors of the legitimacy of their creative alternatives.

The discussion forums expand practitioners’ capacity to engage in each of the tasks of the work of governance. Ongoing deliberation with their peers allows them to interpret the program directives and discern appropriate responses to specific dilemmas of practice. The forums are venues for legitimating, diffusing, and developing creative practices to make programs work better. Collective action affords members of the communities of practice to strive for farther-reaching program improvements. Forum members also sustain one another’s motivation to keep up the effort in the face of the strains of everyday workloads and emergent challenges.

This chapter elaborates each of these points. Throughout this concluding discussion, I examine the conditions that proved more conducive to creative street-level practice and productive deliberation in the practitioner discussion forums as well as the challenges and constraints to their participation in the work of governance. I conclude with suggestions for future research about the feasibility and practice of street-level creativity and point to implications for management and policy.

8.1 The Feasibility of Creative Street-Level Practice

My observations of the FSS and JOBLink practitioner discussion forums suggest that it is feasible for those who lack authority, professional status, and access to resources to contribute to the work of governance. Unlike Bartleby the Scrivener and the self-interested shirkers and
saboteurs characterized in classical principal-agency theory, the practitioners featured in the preceding chapters showed their commitment to their clients, the overarching program objectives, and principles of good service. But they did not always seek to get the rules right. The clash between the high expectations of the self-sufficiency program designs and the reality of the implementation environment presented numerous practice problems that impeded compliance with the official directives. Unlike the typical over-burdened service workers featured in the media, however, these practitioners did not habitually resort to coping mechanisms in the face of these strains.

Nor were their responses confined to situational adjustments to standard operating procedures to accommodate clients' specific circumstances. In addition to doing the right thing for particular clients, they often changed established ways of working and adopted novel practices to make the programs better for the entire clientele. The preceding chapters evidenced that the practitioners engaged in creative street-level practice, both as individuals and as members of their community of practice. Moreover, in contrast to the heroic efforts of the stars of *Ikiru* and *Stand and Deliver*, many of their creative practices were institutionalized as norms of the community of practice or as changes to the official program regulations.

In this section, I contrast the practitioners' creative practices with the coping mechanisms identified in previous research on street-level behavior. I then explicate how self-sufficiency practitioners employed the strategies of bricolage, creative coordination, and sensemaking to take advantage of materials available in the implementation environment to design, legitimate, and implement these creative practices. I close the section by exploring creative practice as a dynamic process.

**Assuming Responsibility for Improving Practice vs. Resorting to Coping Mechanisms:**

The FSS and JOBLink practitioners' responses to the practice problems analyzed in the previous chapters contrast with each of the coping mechanisms Lipsky (1980) identified as the inevitable consequence of the strains of program implementation on the frontlines of public serving bureaucracies. (See Table 8.1.) Rather than seek to simplify and routinize complex tasks FSS and JOBLink practitioners adapted existing routines to resolve practice problems. FSS practitioners created new routines for enrolling clients where technologies for doing so were unspecified in the program designs. JOBLink practitioners established practices for discerning clients' efforts to comply with the program's work requirements and for helping clients pursue
individually tailored plans to enhance their capacity to seek and maintain suitable and rewarding employment.

Table 8.1 Coping Mechanisms vs. Creative Responses to Practice Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping Mechanisms</th>
<th>Creative Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>routinizing complex tasks</td>
<td>adapting routines to resolve problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rationing services</td>
<td>augmenting services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blaming clients</td>
<td>listening to clients and discerning their efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exerting power over clients</td>
<td>empowering clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salvage service values to survive impossible program demands</td>
<td>improving practices to make fulfilling program intent more feasible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resisting policy changes</td>
<td>furthering new goals and pursuing additional improvements</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


By design, both FSS and JOBLink programs rationed the scarce resources of escrow accounts and housing vouchers to a select target population of eligible participants. In their self-sufficiency practice, however, the practitioners sought to augment rather than ration the services they provided to program participants. The FSS practitioners worked with partners in the social service delivery system to increase clients’ access to available resources and improve the quality of services they received and the practitioners created entirely new program elements that added resources that were previously unavailable. JOBLink practitioners extended the program designs to include more intensive case management for clients who were struggling to meet the requirements or who sought to enhance their employability.

Rather than blame clients for their failure to achieve the anticipated results, the practitioners of both programs designed new procedures for listening to clients’ explanations of their barriers to program compliance and for communicating with them about more feasible expectations and opportunities. The practitioners did frequently blame their colleagues for their failure to cooperate. Yet they designed new modes of interaction and sharing responsibility with them as well. And the practitioners did not only criticize the program designs; they also advocated for proposals to change them.

Nor did the practitioners deviate from standard operation procedures to exert power over their clients so as to compensate for their low status in the organizational hierarchy. Instead, creative practices such as the group activities in FSS and the Good Faith Effort reforms of

CONCLUSION
JOBLink aimed to empower their clients, to develop their capacity to succeed, and to enhance their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Moreover, participation in the discussion forums allowed the practitioners to empower themselves and cultivate their sense that they are making meaningful contributions to the lives of their clients and to self-sufficiency practice.

By Lipsky’s definition, these coping mechanisms are means to salvage service values so as to survive the pressures of impossible program designs. The discussions in the discussion forums revealed the practitioners’ intentions to do much more than salvage values and survive the day’s work; they sought to improve practices to make fulfilling program expectations more feasible. Moreover, these practitioners avoided the inclination to cope even in the context of the high expectations of the self-sufficiency programs.

In contrast to previous studies of the implementation of self-sufficiency programs (Meyers et al 1998; Iverson 2000; Meyers et al 2001; Riccucci 2005a,b; Sandfort 2000), these practitioners did not resist this new focus for their housing agencies. Rather than rationalize adherence to old ways of working, the practitioners featured in the preceding chapters developed their understanding of self-sufficiency practice and emergent practice problems and sought creative approaches to addressing them. They also purposefully persuaded other system actors of the value of their creative alternatives.

This difference between my observations and those of other studies of self-sufficiency program implementation is partly attributable to the fact that these practitioners were specifically assigned to these new programs and, in many cases, they took on these positions because of their commitment to the idea of fostering low-income people’s pursuit of economic independence. In addition, FSS and JOBLink operation occurred at the margins of the housing agencies and thus did not entail the more arduous task of organizational change. Consequently, the distinction between the self-sufficiency goals and those of the regular Section 8 programs was more apparent to the FSS and JOBLink practitioners.

Like the welfare workers and welfare-to-work staff in recent implementation studies, the FSS and JOBLink practitioners faced the similar tug of old routines within their agencies, particularly in those where the self-sufficiency agenda was not a priority among other line staff or directors. They too grappled with ambiguous goals and technologies – and in the case of JOBLink, also ambivalence towards the work-first designs. Yet unlike their counterparts, these
practitioners took advantage of this ambiguity to craft alternatives they perceived to contribute to the overarching intent of fostering clients’ economic independence.

In each of these ways, the practices observed through the lens of the discussion forums suggest that it is feasible to expect frontline workers to assume responsibility for improving practice instead of resorting to coping mechanisms in the face of practice problems. Despite the burdens of high caseloads, inadequate program technologies, insufficient resources, and virtually no recognition of their efforts, these practitioners consistently expressed their inclination to take on more responsibility. In fact, they sometimes resisted the implication that they could not take on as much as they would like.

I do not posit that it is feasible for street-level practitioners to assume all of these responsibilities all of the time. On the contrary, the findings from the practitioners’ responses to the three practice problems evidenced numerous examples of what might be considered coping or merely managing the uncertainty, ambiguity, and limitations of the program designs in light of the reality of the implementation environment. Many of their creative efforts failed or were abandoned once it became apparent that they did not or no longer worked as initially conceived. Others were never pursued beyond the initial idea because the practitioners sensed that they lacked the resources, skills, or influence to carry them out. Indeed, I characterize the practice of street-level creativity as encompassing the task of discerning when it is appropriate to make programs better and when it is more effective to get the rules right or do the right thing for individual clients in specific circumstances.

I did not analyze a representative sample of responses to practice problems so as to predict when practitioners are more likely to engage in creative practice rather than coping. This is among the directions I recommend for further research in the last section of this chapter. Rather, I sought to understand the strategies the practitioners employ to make use of available resources for improving their ongoing practice and legitimating their departures from official designs and established procedures. I also sought to identify the challenges they faced in striving to do so and how the discussion forums and the support from the forum’s allies facilitated and guided those efforts. The remainder of this section and the following section explicate the findings from this investigation.
Capacity to Employ Strategies to Improve Ongoing Practice:

Whereas other recent studies of street-level behavior have focused on the obstacles that interfere with implementing program designs, I have observed how the practitioners made use of available resources to address the challenges of practice. Like Maynard-Moody and Musheno’s (2000, 2003) “empowered citizen-agents” they sought to provide their clients with better service instead of simply following program directives would allow. And like Vinzant and Crothers’ (1998) “street-level leaders” they engaged in accountable discretion that referenced the perspectives of multiple system actors as well as the facts of the implementation environment. Yet what I witnessed through the lens of the practitioner discussion forums involved a substantially greater contribution to the work of governance. While street-level leadership, as Vinzant and Crothers define it, involves making appropriate decisions regarding situational dilemma of practice, creative street-level practice is about improving ongoing practices to benefit the entire clientele and affirming that their departures from established procedures are indeed valuable.

The FSS and JOBLink practitioners employed the strategies of bricolage and inter-programmatic coordination to craft novel, value-adding practices from the latent potential in the implementation environment. And they engaged in strategic sensemaking to apply the knowledge amassed from multiple sources to understanding practice problems, assessing the value of their alternatives to standard operations, and persuading others to legitimate and participate in these endeavors. My findings contribute to recent scholarship on the use of these strategies as mechanisms for innovation. They evidence that street-level practitioners -- without the advantages of professional expertise or decision-making authority -- are capable of employing these strategies as well.

**Bricolage:** One way the practitioners crafted creative practices was by using readily available materials in new ways. While they did not use the term “bricolage,” other recent studies evidenced how street-level workers recombined organizational routines and schema. However, in their studies the frontline workers used the tools at hand in ways that did not advance objectives and may even have detracted from them in the practitioners’ own assessment of what was desirable (Sandfort 2003). Others exemplified the adoption of new practices by expanding on existing routines, but the street-level workers relied on help from their supervisors and contracted partners (Cooney 2007). My findings, in contrast, exemplify FSS and JOBLink
practitioners as independent creative bricoleurs who sometimes enlist the help of other system actors.

The most prevalent of the resources recombined to create novel practices were the administrative routines imported and sometimes adapted from the regular Section 8 context as well as other service programs. This strategy yielded more extensive additions to practice when the practitioners had more resources to work with. Administrative procedures and structures were more abundant for addressing practice problems in the regulation-intensive JOBLink program than they were in the flexible FSS program. The fact that bricolage was more prevalent in the more regulatory of the two programs suggests that creative practice is feasible even when programs designs are compliance-oriented and where frontline workers have relatively little discretion. This finding thus extends the idea that formal rules and procedures can be enabling as well as coercive (Blau 1955; Adler and Borys 1996).

**Creative Coordination:** The practitioners also employed the strategy of creative coordination to improve self-sufficiency practice. By cultivating relationships with colleagues within the housing agencies and in other service providing organizations, the practitioners coordinated efforts within disjointed systems and created new program elements to meet clients' needs.

**Cooperation With Partners Internal to Their Agencies:** Both FSS and JOBLink practitioners reached out to their colleagues in the regular Section 8 program to help them track and process client information and to facilitate communication with clients and potential clients. These efforts proved challenging because the Section 8 staff did not perceive the self-sufficiency programs as relevant to their own work obligations. Nevertheless, the self-sufficiency practitioners established working relationships on an individual basis and developed new systems to elicit help on an ongoing basis. Inter-programmatic coordination was more prevalent among the creative practices developed for JOBLink than for FSS. The fact that the nexus between the programs was more apparent to both line staff and agency directors enabled the JOBLink practitioners to successfully devise and adopt new routines for coordinating with their Section 8 counterparts and further, to establish a new position that benefited FSS practice.

**Creative Coordination in External Partnerships:** My findings from the FSS practitioners' reflections on their relationships with other service providers, both from observations of the forum and the interactive-interviews, evidenced that their connections with providers throughout

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fragmented service delivery system helped them improve services for their clients. Even in the absence of incentives or mandates to entice cooperation from partners and despite the historical isolation of their agencies from the rest of the social service system, I found that each of the nonprofit service coordinators had forged relationships with their counterparts in other organizations. This finding warrants highlighting because extensive previous research has focused on coordination and collaboration at the organizational level (Alexander 1995; Bardach 1998, Mandell 2001) or on how referral networks function as a whole (Levine and White 1961, Hjern and Porter 1981, Agranoff and McGuire 2001, 2003, Page 2003). The capacity of street-level workers to establish informal service networks on their own has received much less attention.

Although the practitioners' contacts were more prevalent in the areas that did not relate directly to promoting self-sufficiency and did not include alliances with employers, their networks proved to be resources for improving the services available to their clients. This finding also extends previous research on street-level workers' capacity for service coordination. Much of the existing literature has highlighted the challenges of coordination when goals are not aligned and when the practitioners do not trust one another to follow through with their responsibilities (Weiss 1987; Meyers 1993; Sandfort 1999; Pindus 2000). In contrast, my findings evidenced a wide range of ways the practitioners' connections improved the accessibility and quality of services their clients would have received with a simple referral.

Like studies of service coordination, cooperation, and collaboration among actors with more decision-making authority in their own organizations, these street-level efforts were most fruitful when partners shared common goals, had resources to exchange with one another, and acknowledge the interdependence this complementarity fostered. Where perceived interdependence was minimal, the personal contacts added value by affording the FSS practitioners the knowledge to guide their clients in taking advantage of the existing services. Clients received better quality services when self-sufficiency goals were seen to be more compatible. Such connections improved communication about clients specific needs and fostered accountable follow through by both partners and clients. Where partners' skills and services complemented those of the FSS practitioners and FSS clients were perceived as opportune target populations, cooperation resulted in new program elements that benefited all involved. Some of these collaborative ventures created entirely new programs, particularly when
the forum members worked together with partners as in the award-winning FSS-Fleet Loan Program.

Analysis of the variation in the connections forged among practitioners in each of the eight nonprofit regions points to several factors that facilitate the creative coordination. I found that practitioners' previous work experience and tenure on the job influenced the number of contacts they had forged, yet these were often in fields that were less relevant to self-sufficiency practice. More significant to value-adding networking was the time the practitioners had to devote to cultivating relationships and the support they received from agency directors in pursuing collaborative ventures. I also found that regions where services were more concentrated geographically were more conducive to forging personal connections and where the practitioners had opportunities for sustained interaction with partners, they were more likely to pursue the more intensive forms of value-adding cooperation and collaboration. As further testimony to street-level capacity, some practitioners established these venues for inter-organizational interactions on their own, albeit as part of program design that is often neglected or pursued only symbolically.

Creative street-level coordination was not among the practices I observed in JOBLink practitioners' responses to practice problems because the designs did not call for service referral and because the formally mandated relationships with other service providers did not necessitate that they forge connections on their own. Nevertheless, I did find that the JOBLink practitioners sought out assistance from other service system actors to craft and legitimate their creative practices.

**Strategic Sensemaking for Understanding Practice Problems and Legitimating Creative Practices:** The practitioners employed the strategies of using old routines in new ways and coordinating and collaborating with system partners – whether used alone or in combination with one another – to improve ongoing self-sufficiency practice. Yet for their departures from official program designs and established organizational procedures to count as creative practices, the practitioners needed to determine that they were valuable as well as novel. My observations of the discussions in the forums suggest that practitioners discerned the appropriateness of their responses to each of the practice problems by engaging in strategic sensemaking (Gioia and Chitipeddi 1991; Weick 1995; Weick et al 2005). In addition, the practitioners' sensemaking efforts aimed to deepen their understanding of emergent practice problems, program goals, and
how they might adapt or augment the technologies specified in the program designs to address the problems and achieve the goals as interpreted. The practitioners also employed sensemaking—or sensegiving—strategies to persuade other system actors of the legitimacy of their creative practices and sometimes to join them in putting them into action.

These sensemaking efforts made use of additional resources: the practitioners’ knowledge from practice. Although the practitioners lacked the credentials of professional experts, my observations revealed that they have considerably more knowledge to guide their judgments about appropriate uses of discretion than their knowledge about official program regulations, their “personal justice beliefs” (Kelly 1994), and their individual beliefs about the self-sufficiency program goals (Ricucci 2005a and b). The discourse about self-sufficiency practice I heard in the forums evidenced the multiple sources of knowledge that inform practitioners’ practice that together helped them design creative and legitimate alternatives.

Relational Knowledge from Interactions with Clients: Like previous studies of street-level behavior, I found that the practitioners’ interactions with their clients were an important source of knowledge for practice (Handler 1992, Hasenfeld 1992, Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 2003). The practitioners’ talk about their efforts to engage in sensitive dialogue with their clients further substantiates these critiques of the classical theory that relationships between human service workers and their clients are inherently antagonistic. These self-sufficiency practitioners did more than exercise human judgment, as Handler terms this form of street-level discretion; they created new systems for communicating with clients to improve their capacity to discern what is appropriate for each client in relation to the official regulations and the practitioners’ additional sources of knowledge. Moreover, these exchanges intended to enhance communication in both directions: clients informed the practitioners about their needs and situations and the practitioners aimed to persuade them to pursue the self-sufficiency goals as tailored to their circumstances.

In addition, the knowledge gleaned from clients informed the practitioners’ design of additional creative practices and their legitimation. A prime example of this is the feedback from the Participant Advisory Board that helped the JOBLink practitioners introduce the provisions to allow more extensive education and volunteering in addition to compliance with the work requirement.
**Factual and Expert Knowledge from Interactions with Partners:** The practitioners also amassed knowledge for practice from their relationships with partners in the service delivery system. This input from other system actors helped the practitioners diffuse the tensions between their roles as state-agents and client-agents as Maynard-Moody and Musheno describe them. Like the “street-level leaders” Vinzant and Crothers’ (1998) studied, the self-sufficiency practitioners consulted with other service providers, medical professionals, and legal advisors and took into account the anticipated reactions of client advocates. Yet the self-sufficiency practitioners did more than consult and coordinate. Several of the creative coordination techniques added value by establishing ongoing practices for this type of consultation. They also expanded and refined the practitioners’ knowledge about the other programs and policies that positively impact their clients. Additionally, the self-sufficiency practitioners developed new structures for communication with service partners, both within and outside of their own organizations.

At times, these efforts to make sense of partners’ systems of operation also involved persuading them to change how they work with FSS clients or to join them in collaborative projects. Creative coordination thus involves the strategies of sensemaking and sensegiving as well.

**Practical Knowledge from Experience:** My findings also extend what we know about the influence of knowledge from practice on street-level behavior. Other studies have argued that street-level bureaucrats sometimes apply their unique understanding of organizational procedures and the aforementioned types of knowledge to exercise appropriate discretion instead of taking advantage of information asymmetries to shirk responsibilities or sabotage program objectives (Brehm and Gates 1997; Vinzant and Crothers 1998). Such research on street-level discretion evokes the learning processes often studied among those with more professional expertise or higher status positions in their organizations and among communities of practice in worlds outside of public serving bureaucracies (Schön 1982, Argyris and Schön 1974, 1996, Raelin 1997, Forester 1999; Wagenaar 2004). My findings build on these foundations to show how the knowledge from practice – including the relational and factual knowledge gleaned from clients and partners –developed and is utilized to understand and improve self-sufficiency practice and influence system actors to support improvements. By adopting the community of practice and
problem-oriented perspectives, my research has illuminated facets of street-level cognitive processes that previous research has missed.

Sitting in on years of discussion forum meetings, I listened to a different type of discourse than the reflections elicited in surveys of attitudes, in-depth interviews, or crafted stories. I heard members of the community of practice talk with one another about the challenges of enrolling clients, connecting them to the maze of often inadequate social services, and motivating them. This discourse illustrated how the practitioners amassed knowledge from their clients’ experiences as well as their own efforts to help them over time. I heard what they said they do about those problems and what they said about how their efforts addressed the problems. This talk was both specific and general. They talked about particular clients and their situations and about how they reacted (or planned to react) to these clients. And they drew conclusions about chronic problems with the program designs.

Some of this talk was declarative; the practitioners sometimes explicitly and purposefully articulated their approval of alternative practices that passed the test of what works. But their war stories of triumphs and failures were seldom as clear-cut in self-sufficiency practice as they were in other communities of practice where the evidence of what works is more apparent and outcomes do not take as long to register. In a few relatively rare cases, the practitioners collected evidence systematically to guide assessments of the effectiveness of their novel approaches to these challenges.

More typically, the conversations among members of the community of practice conveyed anecdotal evidence about what works in practice to justify their departures from standard routines. This decidedly subjective basis for assessment is consistent with the definition of creative street-level practice I presented at the beginning of the dissertation. Following creativity scholars, I have distinguished creativity as novelty that is valued subjectively by community of practice members from innovations that produce objectively recognized outcomes for clients. The anecdotes and the practitioners’ discussions about them amounted to a theoretical rather than evidential basis for justifying as well as designing their creative practices.

This talk surfaced the practitioners’ theories-in-use (Argyris and Schön 1974) about self-sufficiency practice. At times, they articulated these theories explicitly. The idea that face-to-face contact is key to recruiting FSS participants, that identifying barriers to employment is a means to discern whether JOBLink participants are making sufficient effort to comply with the
work requirements, and that acquiring financial literacy is vital for achieving economic independence are some examples of such "espoused theories-in-use" (Argyris and Schö n 1974).

Other theories of self-sufficiency practice were implied in the practitioners’ discourse or I deduced them from piecing together the shards of explanations and reflections on action I heard over the course of numerous discussions and subsequently affirmed in follow-up interviews and post-meeting conversations. Among the inferred theories-in-use was forum members’ conviction that interacting with one another helped program participants affirm their commitment to their self-sufficiency goals and cultivate a new sense of themselves as competent, ambitious, and successful mothers and workers. Many of the other ideas about sustaining clients’ motivation – such as the value of discerning effort, setting specific and feasible goals, receiving regular constructive feedback, and developing the capacity to make efforts more successful – were implied as well as articulated explicitly in forum discussions.

Although acknowledgement of practice problems triggered the adoption of most of the creative practices, the practitioners did not generate these theories through a linear problem solving process that begins with diagnosis and proceeds through a sequence of generating and testing alternative solutions for ultimate adoption (Lang et al 1978; White et al 1980; MacDuffie 1997). Rather, as the excerpts from meetings illustrate, their discussions interwove descriptions and causal explanations of the problems with ideas for possible solutions and accounts of what they learned from grappling with particular cases and experimenting with new approaches. They referenced their own impressions and experiences together with details about program regulations, other factual information, and expert opinions gathered from a variety of sources. In contrast to the considered responses to interview questions or the crafted stories Maynard-Moody and Musheno elicited, these reflections on practice and program designs were often truncated and disjointed with unspecified references, ellipses, and minimal elaborations yet were nevertheless comprehensible to community of practice members who shared similar experiences and memories from previous discussions.

The practitioners’ theories-in-use I inferred from analysis of the meeting transcripts are similar to the “collective understanding” of self-sufficiency practice Jodi Sandfort discerned in her research on welfare-reform and welfare-to-work employment placement programs. Yet these theories-in-use are also distinct from Sandfort’s observations of how practitioners align their behaviors with their organization’s mission and its routines, structures and schema. Sandfort
focused on this process of alignment in order to substantiate the practitioners’ active role in shaping their responses to inadequate program technology and ambiguous goals as a counter to the contention that organizational culture is itself the mediator between policy and implementation. In contrast, the forum discussions evidence how practitioners’ understanding of the limitations of the program designs and the obstacles in the implementation environment and their ideas about addressing them develop over time. Moreover, the FSS and JOBLink practitioners not only questioned the effectiveness of program designs; they developed alternative theories for how to achieve program goals. In some cases they also re-interpreted the goals to align them with clients’ actual needs as well as what is feasible to achieve in the organizational context and – in another extension of Sandfort’s organizational focus – in light of the broader implementation environment.

My observations of the practitioners’ sensemaking efforts also differ from Sandfort and Cooney’s analysis of the underlying coherence of the discrepancies between program designs and implementation in that they highlight how the practitioners persuaded others to agree with their interpretations. With respect to their fellow forum members, such sensegiving efforts (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Maitlis 2005) were often subtle; new interpretations of designs and creative alternatives sunk into the norms of the community of practice without formal declarative moments (Rein 1983). Their judgments about the value of novel practices or their peers’ applications of them were sometimes tentative and they often revised them following additional input and discussion. When carrying out their ideas required the approval of those in higher positions of authority, however, the practitioners used their knowledge from all these sources as tools of persuasion; they actively steered the alignment between different perspectives on appropriate self-sufficiency work.

Thus these efforts to discern the appropriateness of their novel ways of working differentiate creative street-level practice from “group think” (Janis 1972) even though they are held to the test of the inherently subjective theories-in-use of the community of practice and the system stakeholders’ whose legitimation they seek.

The Dynamics of Creative Street-Level Practice

The practice of street-level creativity thus exercises the two core tasks of governance. The practitioners employed the strategies of bricolage, coordination and collaboration, and sensemaking to assume responsibility for improving programs. Each of these strategies required
them to be responsive to other actors in the system of governance. The relatively long time horizon of my observations also allowed me to learn how the practitioners responded to different stages of program implementation and changes in the implementation environment and how they took responsibility for altering their creative practices as obstacles, opportunities, and evidence of their effectiveness arose. Creative street-level practice is a dynamic, ongoing process.

**From Fixing Technologies to Reinterpreting Goals:** Virtually all of the creative practices documented and analyzed in the preceding chapters began with the discovery that the program technologies specified in the designs were not sufficient to achieve the goals. The creative practices for recruiting and enrolling FSS clients filled in for the absence of specified technologies; each of the creative coordination techniques aimed to improve on the directives to simply refer clients to available service providers; the group activities added the technology of group work to individual case management; and the Good Faith Effort reforms began with the addition of technologies for discerning effort, communicating to adjust contracts and provide constructive feedback.

Subsequently, the practitioners adapted existing or devised new organizing structures to engage other system actors in the implementation of some of these creative practices. Examples include the regionalization of the Program Coordinating Committees in FSS and the introduction of Specialized Reps and the committee of disabilities experts in JOBLink. In some cases, the practitioners pursued farther reaching changes to the program designs that reinterpreted the goals as officially articulated. The change from promoting employment to enhancing employability in the later stages of the Good Faith Effort reforms were the most dramatic examples of goal reinterpretation. The creative practices of FSS involved more subtle expansions. In addition to the focus on enhancing participants’ self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy as instrumental goals for achieving economic independence, the practitioners added the goal of debt management to the program’s asset building objective.

**Cumulative Creativity:** Another aspect of the dynamics of creative street-level practice is the process of expanding on previously adopted novelties. In some cases, this involved combining new technologies of self-sufficiency practice. Other cumulative processes involved the gradual transformation of theories-in-use and the accompanying adoption of additional creative practices. Still other creative practices evolved in the course of practice as additional value became apparent. The reverse process also occurred. When evidence that the practices once considered
Events and Trends in the Economic and Policy Environment: Much of what I observed in the forums affirms Martha Feldman’s arguments that change within organizations can occur continuously as opposed to in response to a disruptive crisis (Feldman 2000, Feldman & Pentland 2003, Tyre & Orlikowski 1994). Yet Drazin and his colleagues’ (1999) assertion that creativity “may not proceed in linear hierarchical paths but, rather, in uneven chaotic bursts that are responses to problems that erupt over time” (p. 290) also applies to the street-level version of creativity.¹ Changes in the implementation environment either exacerbate practice problems or create new opportunities for change.

For example, according to the FSS practitioners’ interpretation, welfare reform’s introduction of strict work requirements contributed to declining participation in peer support groups. In other respects, welfare reform yielded a “chaotic burst” of creative street-level practice. Both FSS forums leveraged the state’s vested interest in the success of its experiment with the work obligations to secure child care subsidies for FSS participants who were otherwise not eligible for assistance. The rapidly changing policy context in the wake of the state welfare reform also opened an opportunity for new roles for individual practitioners. Several FSS practitioners took advantage of the thirst for reliable and timely information to establish or reinvigorate their Program Coordinating Committees that convened local service providers for sharing knowledge about regulations, procedures, and available community resources. The JOBLink practitioners capitalized on the budget cuts and the altered alliances and allegiances following the withdrawal of the welfare department’s support for the program to push forward alternatives that would not have been approved previously.² However, HUD’s decision to phase out the program effectively aborted the practitioners’ newly approved creative practices.

These external events altered environmental conditions so that the practitioners could exploit more of the materials for creative street-level practice; they reinforced interdependencies among

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¹ An extensive literature explores this role of turning points or critical junctures in social and political development and policy processes (cf. Abbott 1997, Collier and Collier 1991; Kingdon 1984, Zahariadis 1999). The literature on the effect of external events on organizational change has also examined the dynamic of windows of opportunity and punctuated equilibriums yet tends to focus more on technological changes than on policy changes (eg. Van de Ven 1986; Tyre and Orlikowski 1994).

² The story of the GFE policy reforms illustrates several of the aspects associated with the phenomenon of path dependency: the inertial effect of established alliances and networks, sunk costs in existing procedures, the learning costs associated with adopting new approaches, (Arthur 1994, North).
some system actors while affording disengagement from restrictive alliances. Yet taking advantage the potential that critical junctures release requires both recognition of the window of opportunity and the capacity to present convincing proposals to those with decision making authority. I explore how the different configurations of the three discussion forums supplied that capacity to recognize and take advantage of that potential in the next section.

8.2 Enhancing the Capacity for Creative Street-Level Practice in the Practitioner Discussion Forums

The practitioner discussion forums provided the opportunity to hear what other researchers of street-level behavior were unable to glean from their surveys, interviews, and ethnographies. In addition, the forums were a unit of analysis in themselves. My observations of the three discussion forums allowed me to explore what happens when street-level practitioners leave their isolated cubicles on the frontlines of public serving agencies to talk with one another about their common practices. Whereas classical bureaucracy theory depicts worker solidarity as fomenting defensive or even antagonistic alliances against organizational mission and policy goals, my findings affirm that regular interactions among members of communities of practice afford street-level practitioners the chance for more extensive contributions to the work of governance. Participation in the forums helped the practitioners develop their capacity to engage in the tasks of improving program operations and discerning the appropriateness of their creative practices.

Participation in the forums augments the practitioners’ capacity for creative street-level practice by expanding the potential of their innate resources: their knowledge, their efforts, and their commitment to their clients and to one another. This expanded potential derives from the practitioners’ relationships among members of their community of practice. Discussions in the forums distribute knowledge among community members and create new knowledge to guide the practitioners’ efforts both in their individual self-sufficiency practices and as a collective. These relationships enhance the impact of the practitioners’ efforts when forum members pool their resources and the power of their collective voices to engage in creative practices that produce greater value than their individual efforts. Engaging with fellow members of the community of practice sustains the practitioners’ motivation to continue striving to meet the high expectations of self-sufficiency work.

Thus the forums operate in three capacities:
1. As hosts to reflection on practice, they are learning networks that develop members’ capabilities to respond creatively to practice problems.

2. As venues for accomplishing the shared tasks of collective action, they are work teams.

3. As a community of otherwise isolated practitioners working on the margins of their organizations, they are support groups that uphold members’ commitment to the norms of good self-sufficiency practice and cultivate a sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and collective-efficacy.

All three modes were essential to producing the creative street-level practices explicated in the previous chapters. Together, the forums’ roles as learning networks, work teams, and support groups help members use their discretion to get the regulations right, do the right thing, make the programs better, and keep up the effort.

This section summarizes the findings about each of these roles. Throughout, I draw contrasts across the three discussion forums – the nonprofit FSS and JOBLink forums and the forum of FSS practitioners from public housing authorities – to examine how the relative autonomy and support of each forum influences forum activity.

Practitioner Discussion Forums as Learning Networks:

Learning from others engaged in the same type of work through conversations about practice is at the heart of the community of practice perspective and is a fundamental activity of the self-sufficiency practitioners’ discussion forums. My observations of the three self-sufficiency forums surfaced three primary ways the discussions facilitate learning:

1. Practitioners exchange information that is valuable for practice.
2. They share their creative ideas for improving how to engage in self-sufficiency practice;
3. They deliberate with one another to deepen their understanding of practice problems and generate and assess creative solutions.

Exchanging Factual Information: During the forum discussions, the practitioners share information they have gleaned about program regulations, new resources available in the service delivery system, and potential partners for self-sufficiency practice. This factual knowledge helps the members perform their roles in line with the technical requirements of the regulations governing their own programs and those of their partners in the social service delivery system. The exchange of this information in the forum meetings helps members alleviate the effort of obtaining, amassing, and interpreting it all by themselves. This task of proactive responsiveness
is especially taxing when program regulations, budget lines, and economic trends are in flux. Knowing the facts reduces the practitioners’ uncertainty about what getting the program designs right entails.

Information exchanges of this type occurred in each of the three discussion forums. How they accessed the information differed with respect to the degree of support from external actors. The JOBLink forum benefited from direct communication channels with the state level officials represented on the Steering Committee who passed along changes in regulations and answered queries that arose in the practitioners’ meetings. JOBLink practitioners also sought out information on their own, as they did to ascertain the impact of the economic downturn and gather information about how other system actors were responding. In contrast, in both FSS forums, the task of collecting and interpreting information fell almost entirely on the practitioners themselves. This function of forum activity was so fundamental, they continued to distribute copies of policy fact sheets and materials collected about new resources even during periods when they had dismissed with the custom of beginning meetings with individual updates. FSS forum members also invited experts to give more formal presentations about such topics, a practice that was more common in the relatively autonomous public FSS forum.

For the most part, this factual knowledge was easily disseminated among forum members. Each practitioner had similar needs for clarity and applied the information to practice in similar and direct ways. Where providers differed across service areas, the information was less easily transferable. Yet hearing about resources available in one location often prompted forum members to seek alternatives in their own localities and regions.3

Sharing Creative Practices: Forum meetings also occasioned sharing of creative approaches to addressing common challenges of practice among members. Practitioners recounted stories of recent triumphs in overcoming hurdles with particularly challenging clients or service partners. Members’ requests for guidance in resolving dilemmas of practice also prompted the outpouring of accounts of what they did in similar situations. Discourse in the practitioner discussion forums is thus similar to that documented among other communities of practice in which story telling is the dominant mode of learning from one another (Orr 1996, 3)

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3 My analysis of this mode of interaction in the forums is informed by Nonaka’s (1994) observations about exchanges that combine different sources of explicit knowledge as well as Carlile’s (2004) observations about knowledge production when actors have relatively similar realms of expertise and Cook and Brown’s (1999) discussion of learning that occurs when individuals contribute the group’s repository of knowledge.
Forester 1999; Wagenaar 2003, 2004). Yet, as noted above, many of these stories were told in truncated form, with ellipses that fellow members could comprehend without the need for the remaining details.

Also in contrast to other communities of practice, forum members offered generalized recommendations for creative approaches to practice problems in addition to detail rich stories. They sometimes recalled previous discussions in which creative practices were endorsed as the community’s new norms of good self-sufficiency work or they explained their approach in more abstract terms, without the examples of their personal experiences. This finding suggests that, contrary to the argument that street-level practitioners are not capable of independent analytic reflection (Rein 1983), they can make their tacit knowledge from practice explicit to those who share common understanding of the challenges, the resources, and the contexts in which practice is embedded.4

This facility of moving from particular dilemmas to generalized ongoing practice and back to the particular situation of another forum member is a key characteristic of the peer learning that occurs in these practitioner discussion forums. It is feasible because of the similarity among the situations practitioners face in the course of their ongoing practice. Given the lack of formal training opportunities and the need to deviate from official program guidelines to make the programs work, this mode of sharing the community’s repertoire of practices was particularly useful for newcomers to self-sufficiency practice.

Despite the overarching similarities, the diffusion of creative practices across forum membership was not always easy. Differences in the resources available and partners’ priorities and in the organizations and service delivery districts often precluded replication. Forum discussions sometimes facilitated adaptation of members’ practices to other contexts. When direct transfer was not feasible, they helped one another translate facets of the practice to fit colleagues’ work environment, by identifying alternative partners for creative coordination techniques or by reducing or increasing the scale of the practice to accommodate differences in

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4 This mode of discussion reflects Nonaka’s characterization of communication that makes tacit knowledge explicit to “externalize” knowledge so that other audiences can comprehend it and the converse process of “conceptualization” where explicit knowledge is converted back into the tacit knowledge applied through practice. Building on Cook and Brown’s analysis, this mode of learning depends on the group engagement with the aim of improving individuals’ practice.
caseload or geographic constraints. Where differences were more substantial, they gave one another suggestions transforming the practices to apply the principle of the approach in a modified form.

Each of the forums dedicated meeting time to discussing how to modify practices in these ways. I heard the most extensive comparative analysis in the JOBLink discussions about standardizing practices across the member organizations and in the public FSS forum where members’ presentations about their novel practices was followed by an extensive exploration of how the model might work in different circumstances. In the former, the forum’s mediators and liaisons helped facilitate the comparative analysis to steer the group towards consensus. In the latter, the discussion was self-led. In contrast to their nonprofit counterparts who were sometimes discouraged from raising differences in internal agency operations, the FSS practitioners freely discussed constraints with executive directors and regular Section 8 staff in their public housing authorities. Thus, in my observations, external and self-guided facilitation were equally effective at comparative exploration of creative practices provided that discussion topics were not censored.

However, the freedom to voice concerns was not the only factor that limited replication. Some practices were never explained in sufficient detail to prompt the comparative investigation necessary for imitation or adaptation. In addition, creative practices described in depth during the meeting updates when the practitioners’ initial enthusiasm and start-up frustrations sparked description were not mentioned again unless in response to a specific query. Consequently, the repertoire of the community of practice’s self-sufficiency tools was not entirely accessible to veteran members who had not been able to adopt their peer’s practice when it was first introduced let alone to new members who had never heard of the practices. This lapse in collective memory became apparent as I discussed the findings of the creative coordination research with members of the nonprofit forum.

Moreover, even when discussions identified challenges to replication, practitioners were not always able to follow through on their peers’ recommendations for adapting practices to their own agencies and service areas. Indeed, such impasses were the impetus for several of the collectively pursued projects.

This progression from the “transfer” to “translation” and “transformation” of novel practices in the face of differences is adapted from Paul Carlile’s (2004) work on knowledge production across distinct occupational boundaries.
Deliberation About Practice Problems and Creative Solutions: In addition to learning from their peers by sharing information and practices, forum members learn with one another as they deliberate about practice problems and seek potential creative solutions together. In the previous section, I identified the types of knowledge the practitioners brought to these efforts to make sense of self-sufficiency practice and to convince others of the legitimacy of their creative practices. And I contrasted strategic sensemaking and the resulting theories-in-use about self-sufficiency practice with other research on how street-level practitioners rationalize digressions from program intentions by aligning their actions with collective understandings of other organizational actors. Now I draw conclusions from my observations about how forum discussions deepen members' understanding and further their capacity to persuade others to legitimize their proposed actions and join them in carrying them out.  

I observed this type of deliberation in all three of the forums and about each of the practice problems. The forms these discussions took varied with respect to the intensity of the interactions and the diversity of interpretations explored, whether or not they sought consensus and whose consent was pursued, and whether deliberation was facilitated by the practitioners themselves or with the guidance or direction of the forum Chairs or state liaison.

The intensity of the discussions was largely a function of the practitioners' sense of the importance of the issue and the urgency of developing sufficient understanding of the problems and of reaching decisions about how to address them. The practitioners were also more likely to engage in extended discussions of issues when they considered themselves to have exclusive responsibility for addressing their concerns either because those in leadership positions were not aware of the problem or because of what they perceived to be their unique capacity to address it. They deferred to external decision makers to gain understanding and directions for action when they considered getting the rules right to be sufficient for good practice. And they abandoned sensemaking efforts when they no longer seemed urgent or where they assessed that they lacked the capacity to take responsibility for them.

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6 This project focused on the practitioner initiated sensemaking efforts pursued in the context of the discussion forums. Many of the practitioners also engaged in sensemaking efforts with partners in their agencies and the service delivery system, sometimes in similarly ongoing forums for continued reflection and problem-oriented learning. Indeed, as I noted above, several of the creative coordination techniques depended on the practitioners' capacity to convey their understanding of the problems and persuade others to cooperate with them.
The practitioners sought consensus on issues when consistency across the practices of forum members was considered important. They abandoned efforts to agree when the issue was considered less urgent or when they had determined that they did not have the capacity to address it. The practitioners generally sought to concur about their interpretation of the problem, even if they did not agree on all of its facets. An exception may prove this rule: In early JOBLink practice, two members opted to resign rather than pursue what they perceived as a misguided and overly punitive program design while their peers elected to wait and see what emerged in practice.

Consistency about the creative approaches to addressing the problems was more commonly sought in the more regulatory JOBLink program where developing standards of practice was among the forum’s key pursuits. Occasionally, FSS forum members also adopted informal norms of practice. Consensus was also critical to jointly pursued actions, including efforts to persuade external decision makers to authorize their proposals or take action with them or on their behalf. In other cases, the practitioners sought only to gain one another’s approval for independently pursued practices. Such legitimated autonomy or pluralism was often only implied rather than explicitly evoked.

Responsibility for facilitating deliberations was a direct function of the relationship between the forums and external authorities. Only the nonprofit forums had externally appointed Chairs and although the state liaison occasionally attended nonprofit FSS forum meetings, she served in that capacity primarily in the JOBLink forum. The public forum was exclusively self-facilitated.

How effective their deliberative efforts were for reaching agreement, taking action, and influencing decision makers or partners depended on their extent of their knowledge and their skills in integrating and applying their expertise to deepen understanding and influence system actors and their access to influential decision makers. Forum members often exhibited the discursive ability (Maitlis and Lawrence 2007) to engage in this aspect of the work of governance without the support of external facilitators. Their discretion, knowledge from practice, and skills deliberative skills were often sufficient to understand practice problems enough to design and adopt creative solutions and convince one another of their value if such consensus was sought. Agreement about causal explanations of problems or the value of proposed solutions frequently emerged in the course of discussion, sometimes without explicit articulation or explicit articulation of a coherent synthesis of the diverse perspectives voiced. At
other times, they debated alternative perspectives and reached consensus only after exploring additional evidence from outside experts or from their own experience.

Self-guided deliberation sometimes produced successful appeals to partners and decision makers to adopt the forum’s proposals for joint action or administrative changes. However, lack of access to decision makers or sponsors who would ensure that their materials actually received attention limited the influence of several of the public forum’s independent advocacy efforts. Assistance in accessing state and federal decision makers and in presenting their appeals convincingly proved to advantageous to both of the nonprofit forums in their advocacy for regulatory changes. Yet this assistance was not always sufficient to shift opinions among adherents of divergent views of self-sufficiency.

External facilitation also enhanced forum members’ probing of alternative explanations for problems and divergent views of the effectiveness of their creative practices. And it often proved vital to integrating their diverse perspectives and ideas into coherent proposals for further refinement by the group. External facilitation also tended to elicit more constructive criticism among forum members than occurred in self-guided discussions where reluctance to offend one another sometimes curtailed challenging questions or expressions of dissent. However, external intervention was sometimes intrusive and blocked exploration of shared experiences and the generation and pursuit of collective strategies.

In their function as learning networks, the practitioner forums thus present opportunities for sharing information and creative practices and for deliberating together to develop their capacity to respond to problems and improve ongoing practice in light of multiple interpretations of what is appropriate. Similar to H. Simon’s notion of “bounded rationality,” the practitioners’ responsibility for taking on this task is also bounded (Maitlis and Lawrence 2007). They assume responsibility more readily when they consider the issue to be important and urgent and when they view themselves as critical actors. They are also sometimes bound to one another either by obligations of consistent standards or norms of practice or in order to pursue endeavors collectively. Deliberating together affords members the capacity to deepen understanding and influence system actors that they do not have as isolated practitioners. Facilitation and guidance from forum allies enhances this capacity as long as the help does not constrain discourse among forum members.
Despite the relatively long time frame of this study, I did not witness clear evidence that forum members developed their capacity to learn from one another. I did not see them refine or acquire new skills in interpreting practice problems, assessing the effects of their creative practices, synthesizing diverse sources of knowledge, or framing proposals to influence other system actors. This may have been a function of my mode of analysis. More careful attention to the contributions of particular practitioners over time or more systematic coding and analysis of modes of learning might have illuminated such development. In contrast, I did observe an evolution in the FSS forums' leadership capacity, both in the accumulation of leadership skills among members and the development of practices for shared leadership in the public FSS forum and in the erosion of such practices in the nonprofit FSS forum.

Practitioner Discussion Forums as Work Teams for Collective Action

Although the practitioner discussion forums are not recognized organizing structures formed for the purpose of managing task performance among interdependent actors, they share many attributes with work teams that operate within organizations (Hackman 1987; Wageman 1995; 2001). Members of all three of the practitioner discussion forums sometimes worked together as a team to pursue projects no single member could have attempted on her own. Collective efforts took advantage of economies of scale by bringing together clients from each program and pooling resources each practitioner accessed within her own agency and service district. As a group, they had greater access to decision makers, even without liaisons, and their united voices resounded more forcefully than individual appeals. Moreover, working together allowed members to take advantage of one another’s diverse skills and to create a division of labor to pursue complex projects more effectively.

Yet collective action also posed challenges to the communities of practice. As a group of actors beholden to the hierarchies within their discrete agencies, they sometimes lacked the authority to make decisions on behalf of the group. While this obstacle triggered some of the collective endeavors, it also hindered forum activity. Some members were unable to contribute requisite funds to joint enterprises and were prohibited from raising funds on their own. And the lack of independent organizational status exacerbated the forum’s challenge of fundraising and communicating with partners as a group. Indeed, the fact that the public forum was not a formally recognized, independent organization nearly prevented the group from receiving an award for their loan program.
The informal allegiances among members of the community of practice also compromised the forums’ capacity to decide on a particular focus for joint action and to follow through with plans once they were delineated. In the absence of clearly recognized leadership, responsibility for coordinating action steps was often dissipated and ultimately neglected. Nor was there a mechanism for encouraging practitioners to persist in their task when inevitable frustrations eroded commitment. Such leadership challenges were less pronounced in the JOBLink forum where the nonprofit housing agencies and the state representatives assumed many of these responsibilities. In both FSS forums, however, these leadership tasks were a source of struggle.

The FSS forums adopted several practices to overcome these leadership challenges. Both forums established task forces or sub-committees to pursue joint projects in smaller groups that could meet more frequently and make decisions more quickly than the full forum membership. These task forces were also motivated by their sense of obligation to the other forum members. The groups that were prepared to take their projects to the action phase first tended to dictate priorities for collective endeavors. The fact that no such task forces formed in the JOBLink forum further substantiates the claim that cultivating autonomous leadership roles was critical in the absence of external intervention in forum operations.

The self-leadership model of the public group seems to account for at least some of the differences in the capacity to follow through with joint efforts, along with other factors such as the greater capacity for joint action by virtue of the larger size of the public agency group. Public forum leaders assumed all of the aforementioned tasks of leadership. They set meeting agendas, coordinated the division of responsibilities for routine operations, communicated with members, and steered meeting discussions through difficult topics to keep projects on track and to elicit feedback from members when intervening circumstances called for course adjustments. Forum leaders also assumed responsibility for resolving conflict among members on the rare occasions where differences in opinion threatened to undermine progress with partners.

To combat burnout from the strains of forum leadership in addition to their regular FSS work, public forum membership rotated responsibility among members. Currently, the position is shared among two practitioners in order to alleviate some of the burden. Although many members are reluctant to take on additional burdens of meeting facilitation, setting the agenda, or sending reminders about upcoming meetings, the group has adopted a new practice of rotating responsibility for inviting guest speakers.
This assumption of responsibility seems to have promoted a sense of ownership over the forum and its activities that was often absent in either of the nonprofit forums. Although individual members of the nonprofit forums sometimes assumed initiative for research or action projects, they waited for the Chair to call meetings and assented to cancellations when Section 8 business was more pressing than the self-sufficiency programs. Nor did the obligation to report on progress on goals to the Rental Assistance Committee seem to motivate FSS nonprofit practitioners to sustain suspended activity on goals. More typically, they acquiesced to the Committee’s directives to abandon projects when obstacles impeded progress.

I also found that the public forum developed leadership skills in the course of pursuing joint efforts. They applied skills learned in the course of the FSS Fleet Loan Program to initiating and managing other joint projects. The techniques of collective letter writing and document production first tested to apply for the NAHRO award were further developed in advocacy against HUD’s Flexible Budget Proposal and were subsequently used again in correspondence with other decision makers and partners. The creation of the forum’s letterhead for the first advocacy campaign led the group to design a brochure to explain the group’s atypical identity and purpose to prospective partners and speakers. In contrast, some of the practices the nonprofit FSS forum adopted early on—such as working in task forces—atrophied over time and were lost to the community of practice once turnover had replaced all those who had participated in them.

Regardless of the form of leadership adopted, the street-level leadership of each of the practitioner forums contrasts with that observed in previous studies of the front lines of public serving bureaucracies. Vinzant and Crothers’ (1998) “street-level leadership” guides practitioners to legitimate uses of discretion in situational dilemma. It does not account for the creative practices pursued by groups of street-level practitioners dedicated to improving ongoing program operations and designs. Working together with their fellow community members—as a team—enables the practitioners to take farther departures from established routines, access more resources through collaboration with partners from other fields, speak in a louder and more persuasive voice to policymakers and budget setters, and develop a stronger sense of their capacity to serve clients.
Practitioner Forums as Support Groups for Sustaining Motivation

The practitioner discussion forums are also venues for sustaining their members’ motivation to strive to meet the high expectations of the self-sufficiency programs. They do for the practitioners what the practitioners do for their clients with respect to each of the facets of their theory-in-use of motivation. As learning networks, they develop members’ capacity to improve program operations and so make their efforts more rewarding. As work teams, they not only enhance the practitioners’ capacity to perform; they also afford a sense of collective efficacy and esprit de corps that these otherwise isolated frontline workers do not often experience.

The forums also function in much the same way as the peer support groups many of the FSS practitioners established for their clients. They provide members a sense of belonging to a reference group of people who share common values as well as norms of practice and who are dedicated to making a meaningful contribution to their clients’ lives as well as to pursuing the program goals. Like the peer support groups, participation in the forums cultivates the practitioners’ sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem by encouraging their efforts and celebrating their otherwise unrecognized triumphs. The forums are also safe places for venting and commiserating about frustrations, disappointments, and failures that are intrinsic to the implementation of imperfect programs in less than optimal conditions.

The forums also occasion the kind of support that the JOBLink practitioners extended to their clients to help them make “good faith efforts” to meet program expectations. In addition to validating the challenges of self-sufficiency work, forum members help one another set expectations that are high enough to be worth striving for yet modest enough to be feasible. Participation in the forums thus cultivates the intrinsic motivation that is essential for creativity and dedicated public service (Amabile 1986; Behn 1995; Perry et al 2006, Wright 2001, 2004).

A Sense of Belonging: Like typical support groups, self-help, or mutual aid groups, the practitioner forums are voluntary small group structures where individuals who share the same problem or concern meet face-to-face to provide emotional support to one another, learn ways to cope, discover strategies for improving their conditions, and help others while helping themselves (Katz 1981, Wuthnow 1994, Wituk et al 2000). Although most descriptions of support groups pertain to groups of clients, patients, or other victims of unresolved societal and physical problems rather than those whose job it is to help such populations, the practitioner
Discussion forums fit each of these characteristics. Discussion forum members share the predicament of frustratingly high expectations, marginalization within their housing agencies, and isolation from others with the same commitments, responsibilities, and needs for support and guidance. The practitioners attend the bi-monthly meetings voluntarily, and as in support groups, membership is personal rather than organizational. Even in the nonprofit forums, where membership is confined to the population of the eight regional nonprofit housing agencies that contract with DHCD, the self-sufficiency practitioners participate as individuals and not representatives of their agencies. Staff turnover in the FSS and JOBLInk positions often leads to the admission of new members and the exit of others.

It is in this sense that the forum embodies an occupational community (Van Maanen and Barley 1984) of self-sufficiency practitioners in addition to a community of practice. The former emphasizes the camaraderie and social identity of personal connections whereas the latter focuses on the bonds of common work practices. The time designated for “coffee and chat” in the meeting agendas of the public forum and the lunch gatherings that typically followed the nonprofit FSS forum fosters such connections. Personal camaraderie was particularly pronounced in the larger, public forum and may account for its relative longevity and success in pursuing joint creative projects in addition to the aforementioned points about self-leadership. Public forum members celebrated one another’s birthdays, sent condolence gifts, and held congratulatory ceremonies when longstanding members left the group to move on to other positions. To illustrate, in thanking forum members for his parting gift, Rob told the group:

This group has meant a great deal to me. We all convene in one place as FSS coordinators to get energized to go back to our agencies and confront whatever we face there for another few months and then come back and get reenergized again.

Making Meaningful Contributions: Also critical to fostering intrinsic motivation for creative practice was the chance to reinforce their conviction that their efforts were contributing to their clients’ lives and to shared societal concerns. At one of the FSS retreats, the practitioners generated a list of what they found most valuable and challenging about their work that reflects

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7 Self-sufficiency practitioners have financial and career interests in their practice and the problems discussed in the forums in addition to personal interests. In some views, this characteristic distinguishes the forums from self-help groups where members explore their common problems through experiential knowledge rather than professional knowledge (Borkman 1999). However, the self-sufficiency practitioners lack professional training specific to their roles and as I have emphasized throughout this and previous chapters their knowledge-in-use is vital to their creative and ongoing practice and to the discussions in the forums.
this conviction. The list included “the opportunity to really impact others’ lives, … to see a five-year action plan come to fruition, … to assist someone in making their dreams come true, … and to be a mentor and change the way (people) think about themselves.” Similarly, at the luncheon celebrating the end of her term of leading the public forum, Suzanne characterized the group’s mission to pursue meaningful work:

This group has been very important to me. It’s been hard at times. But the group is a place to feel respected and appreciated. It doesn’t matter if you’re in a public housing authority or a nonprofit agency, a big or a small agency; we have always worked together. … It’s almost impossible to do what we do. There is a part of me that said this could be hard. But because of the creativity of the people in this room …., we’re moving people into a new frontier of self-sufficiency.

**Celebrating Triumphs and Encouraging One Another:** In the course of forum discussions, the practitioners recounted their small victories in the enduring struggle to address practice problems. The practitioners celebrated successful recruitment campaigns, resolutions to misunderstandings with colleagues, and progress in helping clients overcome particular obstacles to meeting their self-sufficiency goals. Forum members’ praise of those efforts was often the only recognition the practitioners received. As Tina remarked about what she gains from talking with her peers in the group, “In our agencies, we don’t have anywhere to go to say we are jacked up about a participant getting a job. They say, ‘Big deal. We all work.’ But I know it’s a big deal. I can tell you guys and you’ll get it.”

To venture a proposition for further examination in future research, such expressions of enthusiasm for self-sufficiency work and the efforts to improve practice can have a contagious effect. Hearing about one another’s specific victories and creative practices is a source of inspiration as well as a model for practice. Not every self-sufficiency practitioner has the stamina and fiery commitment of Keyes’ saints or the stars of *Ikiru* and *Stand and Deliver*, yet the participation of a few such charismatic practitioners in the forum allows their more subdued peers to be warmed in their presence. That communal warming fire ignites creativity and passion to encourage all forum members to sustain their motivation for self-sufficiency work and avoid the hazards of burnout.

**Venting Frustrations and Commiserating With One Another:** Forum members also found a sympathetic audience for venting their frustrations. They commiserated with one another about uncooperative partners, inadequate resources, and failed attempts to help clients. They lamented
aborted efforts to adopt their ideas for creative practices. Hearing their peers’ affirmations that these frustrations are part of self-sufficiency practice rather than the fault of their own shortcomings allowed the practitioners to avoid blaming themselves for the limitations of the program designs and the implementation context. This community-wide acknowledgement of the parameters of what is feasible thus reduces the emotional and ethical burden that discretion often places on street-level practitioners. Although discretion is what makes creative street-level practice possible, that very possibility can be an additional weight. Interactions with fellow weight bearers offer the practitioners a chance to relieve the strains of sometimes oppressive responsibilities through constructive coping rather than the evasive coping described in other accounts of street-level bureaucracy.

The value of such opportunities was apparent to Sherry when she described her mixed feelings about leaving her position in the FSS program. She lamented the fact that the meetings of the nonprofit forum had become infrequent at the time when budget cuts and uncertainty about the future of the program were augmenting the strains of making it work. In her words: “I’m not just leaving a job. I’m leaving a piece of me. ... It’s hard enough to deal with the external stuff now with Bush and Romney. But when there isn’t the internal support, it’s becoming impossible. I feel like I’m doing the backstroke against a tidal wave.”

**Setting Feasible Expectations:** Finally, just as the self-sufficiency practitioners strive to establish feasible expectations of their clients, the conversations among forum members help them set more feasible expectations for themselves. Encouraging one another to pursue creative solutions to practice problems raises members’ expectations of what they can do in addition to making meeting the expectations more feasible. At the same time, affirming that some expectations are too difficult to meet, sets the bar at a level that is worth pursuing rather than evading.

Moreover, as Sherry’s previous comment attests, the continuity of forum participation embraces the theory that motivating people is an ongoing process. What it takes changes with developments in the program and the environment and in response to new information and knowledge from practice. This recognition that contributing to the work of governance is a process also reinforces my claim that the practice of street-level creativity requires a balance of *getting the rules right, doing the right thing* for individual clients, and *making programs better*. And it may sometimes entail simply coping with some problems, at least until conditions make...
creativity more feasible. Participating in the community of practice thus reassures members that periods of coping do not mean that creativity is impossible.

8.3 The Value and Limits of Street-Level Effort

The observations examined in the previous chapters and analyzed above have focused on the self-sufficiency practitioners’ efforts to participate as engaged contributors to the work of governance. Their efforts demonstrate that the three mismatches between what we want street-level service workers to accomplish and what we believe they will achieve, as described in the first chapter, are not as misaligned as previously construed. The practitioners are often motivated to serve rather than shirk or sabotage. Their efforts are guided less by self-interest than their interest in finding ways to balance the multiple interests of diverse system actors. They exert effort to address the practice problems that emerge from the gaps between program designs and the reality of the implementation environment. And they exercise their capacity to use available resources creatively. These creative efforts sometimes produce innovations that are institutionalized in the norms of practice or program regulations and, in some cases, result in clear outcomes for clients.

These efforts relate to each of the tasks of governance. They strive to be responsive to clients and other system actors as well as to evidence of what works – and does not work – in practice. They assume responsibility for designing improvements, persuading others to affirm them as valuable and to join them in carrying out their creative ideas. They also seek to develop their capacity by learning, working together, and seeking assistance from others.

The results of these efforts are significant, but they are not sufficient. The self-sufficiency practitioners did not resolve the practice problems that impeded successful implementation. The FSS practitioners eventually reached enrollment targets. But they still struggle to enroll new participants, especially given the impact of reduced rental voucher allocation on potential recruits. Their efforts to coordinate and collaborate with service partners streamlined the complicated maze of separate silos and introduced new resources. Yet these creative practices were not always sustainable in the face of turnover or changes in partner institutions and the broader environment. Nor were their efforts enough to provide all clients with the services they need to resolve the complex challenges that impede steady employment. And their creative practices did not improve the quality of job training and placement services dramatically enough.
to ensure that all clients developed the career skills necessary for jobs that promise true economic independence.

The practitioners devised new ways of working based on their more robust ideas about how to motivate people, yet they did not solve the mystery of what it takes to sustain effort in the face of ongoing challenges. Moreover, the creative street-level practices did not directly address the structural causes of poverty. Nor was that reasonable to expect when the program designs did not aim to do so.

Furthermore, the practitioners did not exploit all of the latent potential for creative practice. There were many possible partners for creative coordination and collaboration the practitioners did not encounter let alone engage in productive relationships. There were more ways they might have combined existing routines and organizational structures and technologies to design new practices. The practitioners could have adopted more of their peers’ creative practices and they might have carried out more of the creative ideas that were abandoned or never fully pursued. And there was certainly much more they could have learned to make their efforts more effective as individuals and as communities of practice.

I present these limitations not as an expression of pessimism or a despondent lament. On the contrary, they are intended as a call for still more dedicated effort. I see my investigation of the feasibility of creative street-level practice and the role of the practitioner discussion forums as a public management version of what Jane Dutton (2003) terms “positive management scholarship. It is inspired by hope and guided by the passions of practitioners who seek to make a difference rather than merely observe differences.

In this spirit, I now offer some ideas for further scholarship to learn how to make street-level efforts more effective. I suggest that we also need to better understand how street-level efforts relate to those of other system actors: policymakers, managers, and citizens.

8.4 Recommendations for Research and Implications for Policy and Practice

This section suggests directions for further research on the feasibility of creative street-level practice, both to examine how generalizable my findings are to other policy and management contexts and to learn about how to make creative practice more effective. I point to lessons learned about the self-sufficiency program designs gleaned in the course of my investigation of the practitioners efforts to improve their operation. I close the chapter, and the dissertation itself,
with a discussion of the implications of my findings for the practice of street-level creativity as one component of a dynamic and inclusive system of governance.

Further Research on the Feasibility of Creative Street-Level Practice:

Generalizing from These Cases and Suggestions for Exploring Additional Policy and Management Contexts: The theory of creative street-level practice presented here is derived from extended observations in the specific context of FSS and JOBLInk practice among practitioners operating the programs in only one state with its particular social welfare policies, social and economic climate, and culture of serve provision. These programs share features of a broad range of self-sufficiency and other programs where street-level practitioners enjoy the blessings and bear the burdens of considerable discretion. Further research is necessary to examine how the claims stand up to other programs with designs that are more flexible than that of FSS and more formalized than JOBLInk.

The focus on housing-based self-sufficiency programs was conducive to this exploration of creative street-level practice because of the concurrent juxtaposition of the self-sufficiency approach and the traditional eligibility and compliance model of service provision. This choice allowed me to focus on self-sufficiency practice without conflating the emergent practice problems with those associated with the related yet distinct phenomena of policy change and resistance to change. The location of the self-sufficiency programs at the margins of the housing agency operations also afforded more substantial changes by less powerful actors than was likely in core programs (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Yet the co-existence of the cultures of people processing and people transforming is increasingly common across social welfare policies. Also, the growing recognition of the need for interdisciplinary approaches to complex social problems means that the co-existence of diverse cultures is increasingly critical to effective implementation. Consequently, the findings from the FSS and JOBLInk cases may be applicable to other policy domains as well. More research is necessary to examine how creative street-level practice works in each of these contexts.

Similarly, housing agencies’ historical isolation from partners in the social service delivery system made it easier to focus on the street-level practitioners’ own efforts to develop value-adding relationships among external and internal partners. Such isolation is typical in service agencies even where the cross-silo nexus is more apparent. Indeed, resource dependency within
the contracting regime tends to create such work environments where programs are distant from agency’s core mission and realms of expertise (Smith and Lipsky 1991). Further research about the potential for street-level initiated coordination and collaboration is worth pursuing in a range of interorganizational configurations.

It may also be difficult to generalize from the FSS and JOBLink experience because the programs tend to employ only one practitioner at a time. This choice was conducive to the research for practical reasons; it allowed for more expedient cross-agency comparison and is a factor that led to the establishment of the practitioner discussion forums. Many street-level practitioners who engage in one-on-one interactions with clients are isolated from other practitioners even if they work in an organization where others perform the same role. Yet the negative effects attributed to worker solidarity in the foundational bureaucracy literature suggest that the proposition that creative street-level practice can occur among frontline staff who work side-by-side with one another warrants further research.

In this vein, team-based strategies are becoming more common among service organizations and would be opportune sites for further research on the dynamics of learning, action, and support I observed in the cross-agency practitioner discussion forums (Foldy 2008). However, such teams do not benefit from the different perspectives, resources, and competencies that members who engage in the common practice in distinct places bring to the forums. Nor do they neutralize the effects of the organizational hierarchy as do cross-agency communities of practice. Comparisons between in-house practitioner teams and cross-agency forums would further elaborate the strategies of creative street-level practice and illuminate more of the conditions conducive to their enactment. Further theory elaboration and recommendations for practice would also benefit from research comparing practitioner discussion forums that span different types of services with those of single-program communities of practice.

While observations of creative practice within the public forum challenged assumptions about the divergent capacities for innovation in the public and nonprofit sectors, more research is necessary to understand the relevance of sectoral differences for street-level creativity. Comparative studies at the organizational level would further illuminate the specific conditions that are conducive to creative practice. In particular, such studies would refine the argument about the need for a balance of support and autonomy for individual practitioners and the practitioner discussion forums.
All these factors suggest that findings from this research may be generalizable to other policy domains and settings. Further research is necessary to test that suggestion. Other policy domains would also afford opportunities to examine creative responses to different types of practice problems. Such studies would likely surface additional ways street-level practitioners can convert regulations and organizational routines into procedural improvements and policy reforms. Where practitioners have more resources to exchange with potential partners or where there is an institutionalized mandate to cooperate, we might learn more about techniques of creative street-level coordination.

Testing the Feasibility of Creative Practice and Elaborating Understanding of How It Works: In addition to examining creative practice in additional policy and management settings, future research projects should be designed to predict when street-level service workers are likely to engage in creative practices and when following the regulations, adjusting them for particular clients, or resorting to coping mechanisms are more probable. Factors to consider include characteristics of policy designs, the organizational and environmental environment, the nature of supports for creativity extended to the practitioners as well as whether they participate in discussion forums. Developing measures to account for the degree of departure from established procedures and the extent of value gained from them would facilitate this investigation.

More research about how the different modes of discourse in practitioner discussion forums promote learning, collective action, and motivation is also essential to augment the feasibility of creative practice. Questions particularly worth pursuing concern how practitioners learn from one another’s practices and adapt them to other contexts. How relaying stories from practice helps practitioners formulate and examine theories-in-use for creative practice also warrants additional investigation. Such studies should also examine the implications of different forms of conveying those stories in terms of the level and type of detail and the listening practices of the audience.

My research also raises questions about alternative models of leadership in communities of practice as well as how peer leadership and external guidance might interact. Other questions of discussion forum management include the effects of different group sizes and compositions, the frequency and duration of meetings, and different modes of facilitation and agenda setting.
How members of practitioner discussion forums motivate one another is an ambitious research agenda in itself. My initial conjectures about the contagious effect of expressions of enthusiasm and triumph – and alternatively, of frustration and defeat – warrant further probing. Issues of competition, or the converse effect of complacency with doing less than one’s peers, are also areas for study.

How practitioners and policy analysts might integrate their modes of inquiry also warrants exploration. Peer learning accompanied by formative evaluation and the appropriate assistance for interpreting the results may enhance the design and evaluation of creative practices as well as further understanding of implementation challenges and the effectiveness of program designs.

**Lessons for the Self-Sufficiency Paradigm:**

Although my main objective in observing the practitioner discussion forums was to elucidate creative street-level practice, the discussions in the forums also yielded a secondary set of findings about the limitations of the self-sufficiency program designs. These limitations do not constitute a thorough evaluation of FSS and JOBLink let alone the self-sufficiency paradigm. However, they do suggest some areas for further research about how to refine the policies and set more feasible expectations for what they can achieve.

This research has called attention to the inadequacy of policymakers’ and policy analysts’ understanding of a core aspect of the self-sufficiency paradigm – motivation. There is much more work to be done to apply the extensive body of theoretical knowledge about how motivation works in other disciplines to the social policy arena. In addition, there is a need for more empirical research about what motivates low-income clients and the street-level practitioners who work with them. What we have learned from the practitioners’ theories-in-use suggests that this endeavor requires better measures of success – as well as measures of their efforts – that take into account clients’ different starting points and various obstacles as well as evaluation that measures progress along the way and far enough into the future to avoid missing beneficial policy effects.

My investigation of the practitioners’ creative coordination efforts also calls attention to the need for more resources for services, improved service designs, and better training for service workers if service referral and interorganizational coordination and collaboration are to be effective. Findings also suggest that we need to know more about how to foster cooperative relationships within service delivery systems, including private sector partners and employers.
We also need to learn about effective organizing structures for convening actors and systems for productive communication for managing and working through differences in service philosophies and management styles.

My research also raises some more specific policy concerns. Although the Welfare-to-Work Voucher Program that JOBLink represented has already been terminated, the observations of the JOBLink practitioners’ efforts suggest that there is more to learn about whether the model of linking work requirements with housing assistance is effective for promoting workforce participation and enhancing clients’ longer term employability. The evaluations that guided HUD’s decision to discontinue the demonstration did not focus on cases where work requirements were clearly delineated and enforced and practitioners actively sought to help clients who are struggling to comply. The fact that approximately 80% of JOBLink participants were employed and another 11-12% were in active job search by the third year of program implementation provides some counter-evidence that that the strategy works.

This contrast with the findings from the official evaluations also suggests that evaluators must allow sufficient time to pass for practitioners to adopt practices for doing the work (both getting the programs right and making them better) and include research methods that capture the barriers clients’ face and their incremental steps to address those barriers as well as increases in employment rates and wages. Only by testing the program design as it is implemented over a sufficient time period is it possible to draw accurate conclusions about the effect of work-contingent housing assistance on workforce participation.

My observations of FSS and JOBLink practice also call attention to the need for a more general inquiry into how housing assistance helps clients succeed in other dimensions of life. Such research would guide housing organizations to make more of that nexus and extend initiatives to do so beyond what street-level practitioners can achieve through their own creative practices. The voucher-based context of FSS and JOBLink implementation also raises questions about the relative advantages of place-based approaches to the integration of housing and other social services. Inquiry into strategies for program recruitment, ongoing engagement with clients and among clients, and productive connections with community actors in the dispersed, voucher setting of housing assistance is warranted.
Implications for Managers, Technical Assistance Providers, and Advocates:

This study of creative street-level practice and the practitioner discussion forums offers some lessons for practice that are useful even before the findings from future research are available.

**Supporting Street-Level Creative Practice Within Individual Agencies:** Providing practitioners with discretionary budgets, training opportunities, access to influential partners, and time to devote to exploring alternative models and experimenting with new ideas, can augment their capacity for creative practice. Agency managers, directors, and higher level officials can also sustain creative practice by instituting means to recognize practitioners' efforts, by actively encouraging them to test new ideas, and by reassuring them of their abilities to do so.

**Cultivating Existing Communities of Practice:** Practitioner discussion forums would benefit from sponsors to help access resources for inquiry and for implementing creative ideas and to connect members with potential allies for collaboration and learning. Sponsors with influence in policy spheres would also facilitate creative practice by opening channels of communication with decision makers to help enact policy reforms and redirect budget resources. Well placed sponsors would also help broadcast the practitioners' achievements so that broader audiences become aware of what the forums are striving to do and so that the potential for creative street-level practice can eventually replace stereotypical images of street-level bureaucrats. Discussion forums could also use assistance in convening ongoing interactions with clients and members of their local communities.

Agency directors, state officials, and technical assistance providers can help members of practitioner discussion forums improve meeting facilitation. Training in facilitation skills is one approach. Training should include guidance in establishing small task-oriented groups, goal setting and problem analysis, project planning and budgeting, and fundraising. Some forums would also benefit from expert facilitation at selected meetings or during periods of peak activity or times that warrant reconsideration of priorities and directions. Support for documenting discussions and practices and the design of mechanisms for preserving and disseminating the collective knowledge base are also critical. And resources for exploratory research as well as

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8 For an elaboration of these ideas among actors other than street-level practitioners see Snyder and Briggs 2003 and Wenger et al 2002.
reflective and recreational retreats for practitioners are also likely to enhance learning, action, and sustained self-motivation.

In addition, more research – including action research with practitioners – is necessary to develop techniques for learning within the practitioner discussion forums. In addition to the joint researcher-practitioner research agenda suggested above, experiments with providing practitioner discussion forums discretionary budgets -- along with technical assistance in making use of the funds -- would further understanding of the feasibility of the creative street-level practice and the gains from participation in communities of practice.

**Creating New Practitioner Discussion Forums:** Finally, policy actors and others who care about improving social welfare programs can convene practitioner discussion forums where they do not already exist. Together with the forum sponsors, conveners could also further disseminate knowledge for creative street-level practice and expand forums’ impact by bringing together practitioner discussion forums representing similar communities of practice.

8.5 Creative Street-Level Practice as a Step Towards “Great Governance” in Hard Times

Recognizing the potential for creative street-level practice and acknowledging that there are steps to take to make creative responses to practice problems more feasible also has implications for how we understand accountability and good governance. The more optimistic view of street-level practitioners presented in this study suggests that they have an important part to play in turning bureaucratic institutions into adaptive systems that respond to local conditions and changing circumstances in ways that add value for the public. Moreover, this view leads us to expand how we understand who that public comprises.

Street-level practitioners are simultaneously state-agents, citizen-agents, and members of a community of practice. I have argued that communities of street-level practitioners help define what good practice entails and continually strive to raise standards of practice. They also foster continuous program improvement. Communities of practice – and the discussion forums that convene them – are thus organizing structures that afford street-level practitioners the chance to be more productive contributors to the work of governance.

But as participants in the system of governance, street-level practitioners need and have partners for upholding the principles of responsiveness, responsibility, and capacity development. They often need more opportunities for productive engagement with those other
actors and the practitioner discussion forums can be venues for that. Moreover, street-level practitioners are not only public servants; they are also part of the public. And they are members of their local communities as well as communities of practice. Thus seeing street-level practitioners and their communities of practice as promoters of good governance and agents of change also has implications for advocacy and activism.

Clients and their advocates could encourage practitioners serving their communities to approach practice problems creatively and they can demand that local agencies support their creative efforts. Advocating for creative street-level practice could be an additional component to the strategies of appealing for more funding and alternative policy directions. How advocates might make those demands on street-level practitioners is a question that remains to be answered. My hunch from observing the practitioners and their discussion forums is that promoting creative practice is more likely to succeed when advocates view street-level practitioners as allies rather than adversaries.

Advocates might collaborate with street-level practitioners and their communities of practice to respond creatively to practice problems. Advocates could facilitate productive inquiry with clients to help identify the underlying causes of problems, further test what works in practice, and brainstorm about novel approaches. Local advocates’ connections within the social service delivery system and the residential and business community could help develop creative coordination and collaboration practices that surpass what street-level practitioners can do on their own. Advocates’ knowledge about other public policies and their familiarity with the map of political players on local, state, or national levels would also enhance street-level practitioners’ efforts to appeal for policy reforms and budget allocations. The united voices of local activists and street-level practitioners also stand to send clearer, louder, and potentially more influential messages to decision makers.

In addition, local advocates and mobilized clients could foster creative street-level practice by helping the practitioners appeal for the resources and improved working conditions they need for learning and action. These actors could also broadcast the practitioners’ creative efforts and achievements to amplify their exposure among potential partners and allies and to invigorate the practitioners’ energy for creative practice.

The joint forces of street-level practitioners, clients, policy advocates, and community activists would constitute a wider community of practice of creative street-level practice.
proponents. United by their shared commitment to improving the lives of low-income people, this community of practice would learn together, act together, and support one another’s efforts to make significant improvements to social welfare programs. In the hard times of fiscal austerity, conservative policy regimes, and economic downturns, making more with what exists is a particularly promising strategy. This broad community of practice would make meeting the public’s high expectations for governance that promotes the needs of all citizens more feasible. To quote a phrase from a draft of the public forum’s new statement of purpose, creative street-level practice that is supported by practitioner discussion forums and other allies is “not just good governance; it’s great governance.”


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