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The Impact of Managerialism on Nonprofit Organizations Serving People Experiencing Houselessness in the United States

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Abstract: The concept of managerialism as it relates to the field of human services has garnered increased attention from researchers in recent years. Understood as the “dominance of management practices and ideas derived in the for-profit sector”, managerialism is widely embraced within the nonprofit sector in the United States. Despite increased attention to the role and impact of managerialism within human services, theoretical and empirical research examining the operationalization of managerialism within human service organizations remains limited. In the field of homeless services specifically, little is known about how managerialist ideology and practice affect the provision of services within organizations serving unhoused populations. This paper examines the role and impact of managerialism on the organizational functioning of a large homeless services agency located in a major metropolitan area of the United States. The specific ways managerialism is operationalized within this organization are examined. Further, the impact of managerialist ideology and practice on the organization’s ability to work successfully toward its mission of eradicating homelessness is discussed. In doing so, this paper suggests that managerialist approaches to providing homeless services may impede an organization’s ability to meet its goals and mission in ways that align with institutional logics more commonly associated with human service organizations and the nonprofit sector more generally.

Keywords: managerialism; homeless services; human service organizations; unstably housed; homelessness; homelessness



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1. Introduction

The United States Housing and Urban Development Department (HUD) estimates that on any given night, more than half a million people in the United States are unhoused in a sheltered or unsheltered environment. In 2020, approximately 1.25 million people experienced homelessness, with the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbating the issue (ALL IN 2022) individuals experiencing homelessness during the pandemic were more vulnerable to contracting the disease in environments such as homeless shelters (Levesque et al. 2022) and the economic uncertainty caused by the pandemic for people who were already economically insecure increased the likelihood of falling into homelessness. Consequently, the capacity of service providers to provide shelter and other services was severely impeded during the pandemic due to an increased need for services and the physical distancing requirements needed to curb disease transmission. As such, pandemic-induced difficulties only intensified the existing challenges already faced by many agencies serving the homeless (ALL IN 2022; Conway et al. 2020).

Like all nonprofit social service organizations, agencies tasked with implementing homelessness policy initiatives often face considerable difficulty, including but not limited to, shortages of temporary and permanent housing solutions, meeting the needs of chronically homeless populations, co-occurring health and mental health problems among clients, and difficulties related to the coordination of Continuums of Care systems¹ (Fowler et al. 2019; Mullen and Leginski 2010; Quinn et al. 2018; Tiderington 2019). Further, it is understood that nonprofit social service agencies, homeless organizations included, operate in

environments characterized by resource scarcity and austerity mindsets, both of which are driven by neoliberal economic and social policy (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2020; Lam 2020; Fabiano 2019; Beaton 2021). Given the responsibility of nonprofit social service agencies to support disenfranchised communities and alleviate social problems, examining the impact of organizational models and practices rooted in scarcity-driven approaches is critical to understanding the challenges service providers face more generally. This is particularly important in the context of homeless services given the consistent shortfall of resources these organizations experience as well as the pervasiveness of homelessness within the United States.

One way to examine the effects of scarcity-laden organizational environments on social service provision is through the lens of managerialism, which can be regarded as both the result of and an antidote to austerity measures. Simply put, managerialism, as it relates to the nonprofit sector, refers to the process by which nonprofit organizations adopt market-based logic (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2020; Beaton 2021; Hvenmark and Willner 2023; Willner 2017; Willner 2019; Hyde 2024). In other words, organizations begin to look and act in ways that are informed by, and reminiscent of, for-profit organizations. This includes the adoption of managerialist ideology and practices, both of which have their roots in neoliberal economic and social policy and the New Public Management model (NPM) (Alexander 1999).

This paper aims to address the following questions: How do organizational environments characterized by scarcity and austerity support and contribute to the operationalization of managerialism within nonprofit homeless service organizations? Conversely, in what ways does managerialism contribute to and maintain scarcity-laden organizational environments within the human services context? The specific ways managerialism affects services related to supporting clients experiencing homelessness through case management, efforts to secure temporary and permanent housing, and other supportive services will be examined.

Secondly, the paper considers how managerialism, as both an ideology and a set of practices, contributes to and maintains organizational environments characterized by scarcity. Further, the study contributes to the growing body of evidence that supports the conclusion that managerialism can lead to adverse outcomes for social service-providing organizations (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2020). Finally, the research supports the assertion that the difficulty of solving widespread social problems such as homelessness is, in part, the result of infrastructure failures at the local, state, and federal government levels (Allegrante and Sleet 2021). Strategies for combatting the negative effects of managerialism in human services are discussed and directions for continued research are suggested.

1.1. Managerialism in the Nonprofit Sector

The emergence of managerialism within the United States' nonprofit sector can be traced to neoliberalism; a set of economic and social policies that emerged in the 1980s in the United States and Europe. At its core, neoliberalism is characterized by principles of the free market, which suggest that human welfare is best secured and maintained by "liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills" (Harvey 2005) and by embracing the concepts of individual responsibility and work ethic (Hasenfeld and Garrow 2012). The predominance of neoliberal policies and practices in Western societies and economies has resulted in the widespread embracing of deregulation, privatization, and an overall retraction of the state from the provision of services and the social safety net for vulnerable populations (Harvey 2005; MacEwan 2005). This is particularly true for the United States. Although these trends have, in part, contributed to the exponential growth of nonprofit organizations during the latter part of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries, they have also had a significant impact on the structure and function of organizations aiming to serve the public good (Alexander and Fernandez 2020). This is especially evident in the increase of nonprofits providing services historically rendered by the state, as well as the types of organizational models nonprofits are likely to embrace, which increasingly

resemble those typically found in the for-profit sector (Dart 2004; Maier et al. 2016; Sanders and McClellan 2014; Suykens et al. 2023).

As an economic model, neoliberalism emphasizes market domination of the organization of society, which calls for “a minimal role for the state and maximal role for markets in organizing economic life [and by extension, social life]”, and is most notably observed in the form of privatization of public services and state deregulation (MacEwan 2005). However—and perhaps more importantly for a discussion of its impact on the nonprofit sector—neoliberalism cannot be understood as simply an economic model, as its reach extends far beyond economic systems. Rather, it is better understood as a set of economic, political, cultural, and social values; an ideology of “hyper-individualism” (Wilson 2018), that has seeped deeply into all aspects of economic, political, and social life both nationally and globally (Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005). The consequences have been widespread, resulting in “a depoliticized citizenry marked by apathy and cynicism” (Chomsky 1998), as well as increased and persistent economic and social inequality due to expanded concentration of power and wealth among elite groups and entities both nationally and globally (Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005; Chomsky 1998).

Concerning the nonprofit sector in the United States, neoliberalism as both an ideology and an economic model is viewed as having had precise and lasting effects on the role nonprofits play in U.S. society (Eikenberry 2009). This is most notably observed in the devolution of state-provided services to vulnerable populations that began in the 1980s under the Reagan Administration, the privatization of state enterprises, and of particular importance, the introduction of the New Public Management (NPM) model (Alexander 1999; MacEwan 2005). The New Public Management marked the institutionalization of market-oriented strategies and practices within governmental and private, nonprofit organizations. Stemming from the notion that market-based strategies are the most effective ways of meeting organizational goals and ensuring optimal results (Alexander 1999) the NPM gained a stronghold within government and nonprofit organizations, subsequently leading to what is known as the managerialization of the nonprofit sector (Hvenmark and Willner 2023; Maier et al. 2016; Hvenmark 2016).

Simply put, managerialism posits that all organizations possess more similarities than differences. As such, organizational performance can best be optimized through traditional management theory and practice, regardless of the type of organization. Within the context of the nonprofit sector, managerialism denotes the adoption and implementation of market-based logic aimed at maximizing productivity through procedures and practices aimed at increasing efficiency, accountability, and standardization (Richards and Kuhn 2023; Hvenmark 2016; Klikauer 2015). Often examined through the lenses of marketization, professionalization, commercialization, and corporatization, the role and utility of market-based logic within the nonprofit sector is well documented. Although useful in expanding our understanding of the relationship between market logic and the nonprofit sector, these concepts typically fall short in explaining the specific ways in which market-based logic become internalized and operationalized by NPOs (Hvenmark and Willner 2023). In the twenty years since Dart (2004) introduced the concept of nonprofits becoming “business-like”, researchers have been posing questions about the nature of this “businessification” and how it affects organizations. With its emphasis on the applicability and efficacy of market logic regardless of organizational setting, managerialism has emerged as a more precise and appropriate framework through which we can examine how NPOs start to look and act more like businesses.

While there is no one agreed-upon definition of managerialism, the concept is typically understood as both an ideological project and a set of practices rooted in market-based logic (Hvenmark 2016; Doran 2016). Managerialist ideology supposes that management, and everything associated with it, is both logical and rational. It also suggests that the concept of management is value-neutral and always leads to positive outcomes (Klikauer 2015; Shatil 2020). Further, it assumes that desired outcomes can always be achieved through managerial theories, expertise, and practices (Doran 2016).

Managerialist practices are the enactment and institutionalization of managerial ideology. This is most readily observed in organizational efforts to increase efficiency, accountability, organizational legitimacy, and growth and expansion (Willner 2019; Meyer et al. 2013; Hvenmark 2013; Mitchell 2018). Within nonprofit organizations, this is operationalized through strategies and practices designed to increase revenue generation, maintain or increase profitability, and maximize efficiency through the use of labor-intensive performance measurement systems designed to increase accountability to funders and other external stakeholders. Managerialism also encourages the use of for-profit language and rhetoric (CEO instead of Executive Director, for example) to increase organizational legitimacy, which is considered critical for success (Meyer et al. 2013). In and of itself, managerialism does not signify something intrinsically negative or nefarious. However, the for-profit and nonprofit sectors inherently differ in both purpose and function (Anheier 2014). As such, it is incumbent upon organizational scholars to investigate the overall effectiveness of managerialism within organizations and the nonprofit sector more generally. This is particularly important when thinking about human service agencies, whose primary objective is to support communities in need through organizational logic rooted in the social work values of “professional autonomy, commitment to vulnerable people, social reform, agency mission, and diversity” (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2020).

1.2. Theoretical Explanation of Managerialism

The managerialization of the nonprofit sector can be explained through the lens of institutional isomorphism, a concept derived from neo-institutional organizational theory that helps to explain why organizations within the same institutional field come to resemble one another (Powell and DiMaggio 1983). Of particular relevance to the context of managerialism in NPOs are processes of coercive and mimetic isomorphism. From the perspective of neo-institutionalism, both types of processes occur to increase organizational legitimacy in service to organizational survival (Powell and DiMaggio 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Coercive isomorphism refers to “formal and informal pressures exerted on organizations by other organizations upon which they are dependent and by cultural expectations in the society within which organizations function” (Powell and DiMaggio 1983). In the context of managerialism, it can be argued that nonprofits experience a certain degree of coercive pressure, particularly from the funding sources on which they are dependent, to adapt to managerialist mandates. This pressure is ultimately based on prevailing notions of acceptable organizational behavior embraced by external environmental actors. In this case, these pressures are directly connected to directives from the NPM model.

Mimetic isomorphism is understood as a process of adaptation resulting from a state of organizational uncertainty. Where mimetic isomorphic processes are at play, uncertainty leads organizations to look for “models” upon which they can build, often to increase organizational legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Organizations look to others within their organizational fields to determine what constitutes legitimate practices and procedures. In the case of the nonprofit sector, the organizational field is dominated by the widespread adoption of managerialism. Environments of scarcity and austerity mean nonprofit organizations are operating in a constant state of uncertainty and vulnerability. This, in turn, leads organizations to implement managerialist practices, which are viewed as necessary for survival.

Isomorphism is a useful framework for understanding why and how NPOs have resorted to the widespread adoption and institutionalization of managerialist ideology and practice (Hersberger-Langloh et al. 2021). Over the last two decades, researchers have established that managerialism has played a significant and often dramatic role in the restructuring of the nonprofit sector. However, there remains a considerable gap in our understanding of the effects of managerialism on the pro-social goals of the sector in general and on the structure and functioning of individual organizations. Cognizant of the idea that that NPOs are inherently different from for-profits in both structure and

function (Anheier 2014), researchers are turning their attention to questions related to the impact of the widespread adoption of managerialist ideology and practice within the nonprofit sector.

Admittedly, managerialism in and of itself is not inherently negative. However, the intrinsic differences in the purpose and function of nonprofit and for-profit organizations necessitate a critical examination of the effectiveness of managerialist practices in supporting organizational goals, as well as the overall effects of managerialism on the sector more generally. Given the evidence suggesting that managerialism does, in fact, adversely affect nonprofit organizations, particularly as it relates to their pro-social orientations, further investigation into the how the nonprofit sector is effected by managerialism is important (Willner 2017; Willner 2019; Maier et al. 2016; Abramovitz and Zelnick 2015; Liu et al. 2022; Shirinashihama 2019).

1.3. The Effects of Managerialism on Human Service Organizations

As research on managerialism in the nonprofit sector has expanded, so have questions about how managerialist ideology and practices influence varying aspects of organizational functioning. While more is now understood about the emergence and institutionalization of managerialism within nonprofit organizations, less is known about the effect of managerialism on organizational structure and function, particularly as it relates to the provision of social services.

While there is some evidence that managerialism, and the New Public Management more generally, is useful for nonprofit organizations (Suykens et al. 2023) recent scholarship examining the effects of managerialism on nonprofit social service agencies shows that organizations can also be adversely affected by managerialist ideology and practice (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2020). Managerialism emphasizes the “bottom line”, which is often based on metrics and outputs rather than the quality of services and community needs. Operationally, the focus placed on the bottom line is observed through processes that stress the standardization of practices, increased accountability requirements in the form of high levels of required documentation and reporting, and the implementation of performance management systems based on quantifiable metrics. While these processes may increase efficiency and productivity as defined by market logic, the automating of tasks in favor of meeting the bottom line also results in deemphasis on relationships that are necessary for effective social service provision (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2015).

Workers in highly managerial social service environments also experience a conflict between the logic of the market and the logic of social work (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2020; Willner 2017; Willner 2019). In other words, there is often an incongruence between what the organization expects of their employees, which is informed by managerialist ideology and practice, and what staff believe to be the values of the nonprofit or social services sector. Managerialism’s mandate to ‘do more with less’ means employees are left trying to figure out how to effectively meet client needs without the sufficient means to do so. Thus, success is highly dependent on the commitment of employees to bridge the gap between inadequate funding and client needs. This results in higher rates of burnout and job dissatisfaction as well as a decreased sense of autonomy and control over one’s work (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2020).

Further, research has shown that frontline workers, commonly referred to as “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 1980) are disproportionately negatively affected by managerialist policies and procedures on social services. As the individuals responsible for service provision, frontline workers often engage in mitigating strategies to continue to provide some level of quality services to individuals while working within environments characterized by scarcity and austerity. The onus is placed on the workers to solve the difficulties associated with managerialist practices, often operating without the support or intervention of leadership.

The reliance of human service organizations on government grants and contracts means human service nonprofits are also uniquely affected by managerialist ideology

and practice. While similarities exist between social service organizations, human service agencies are not homogenous. The unique challenges these agencies face may be affected, in part, by the boundaries, rules, and structures of the subfields of which the originations are a part. Although understanding the role of managerialism within the nonprofit sector more generally is useful to both researchers and practitioners alike, the unique differences between subfields make it equally important to investigate the role that managerialism plays in organizations serving specific communities or populations. In doing so, researchers and practitioners can become better equipped to intervene in ways that directly address issues specific to an individual subsector.

In the homeless services subfield, for example, much of the policy around service provision is informed by decisions made at the national level through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and other federal agencies. For example, the Housing First model, which gained popularity during the early 2000s under the Bush administration, became the primary framework through which homeless services were designed and implemented ([Evidence Matters 2023](#)) and the HEARTH Act of 2009 amended previous homeless policy to focus on the principles and practices of Housing First ([The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act 2009](#)).

During this time, states and counties needed to amend their homeless policies to align with Housing First if they wanted to remain competitive and secure funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. At the local level, organizations would need to shift their modality of service provision as well if they wanted to continue to compete successfully for government grants and contracts. The influence of the New Public Management on the public sector, and the subsequent entrenchment of managerialism, means that more often than not, government contracts for social services are laden with managerialist principles. As such, not only are they responsible to and restricted by funders' directives for how to meet goals and outcomes, but to remain in contract compliance homeless service agencies receiving government funding are ultimately forced to embrace managerialism, irrespective of the outcome.

2. Materials and Methods

One of the primary goals of this research is to discern how an environment of austerity and scarcity is both supported and perpetuated by managerialism within homeless services organizations. To answer this question, a qualitative case study was conducted with a homeless services agency serving a large, urban community in California. Data were collected using a constructivist grounded theory approach. Interviews were conducted with 16 staff members ranging from frontline workers to C-suite level employees.

2.1. Agency Profile

The organization in this study provides transitional and permanent housing to individuals and families experiencing homelessness, and supportive services to individuals and families with unstable housing. Since its founding more than 35 years ago, the agency has grown into a large, multi-site homeless services provider serving thousands of people annually. In recent years, increased need coupled with opportunities to grow has led the organization to expand to other cities. As such, the organization has experienced rapid growth over the last 10 years. The organization serves more than 25,000 people annually in five regions throughout the state of California.

The mission and goals of the organization can best be understood as working to alleviate the challenges associated with homelessness, providing those without stable housing with pathways out of housing instability, and working to permanently end homelessness throughout California. Services include, but are not limited to, case management, assistance in finding a job, access to physical and mental health support, assistance with accessing public benefits, and population-specific services, such as services to homeless veterans. The organization strives to tailor supportive services to the needs of each individual and family they serve making their approach both individualistic and holistic in nature.

2.2. Sample

Using case study methodology, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 16 staff members working at the organization. Participants' roles in the organization ranged from frontline workers to C-suite leadership (Table 1). The researcher invited the agency to participate in the study and after receiving permission from the organization's leadership, participant recruitment began. At the time, there were over 200 full-time and part-time staff members working throughout multiple sites. Every staff member received an email from leadership informing them of the agency's participation in the study. All staff members were invited to be interviewed. Participation was encouraged by leadership but not mandated. All staff were provided with the researcher's contact information and were told to reach out directly if they were interested in sitting for an interview. A total of 16 staff members contacted the researcher expressing interest in participating.

Table 1. Participant job title and organizational level.

Title	Organizational Level
Case Manager	Frontline Staff Member
Case Manager	Frontline Staff Member
Case Manager	Frontline Staff Member
Program Coordinator	Frontline Staff Member
Case Manager	Frontline Staff member
Senior Director	Senior Leadership
Associate Director	Middle Management
Associate Director	Middle Management
Associate Director	Middle Management
Senior Director	Senior Leadership
Associate Director	Middle Management
Senior Director	Senior Leadership
Chief Development Officer	Executive Leadership Team Member
Deputy CEO	Executive Leadership Team Member
Chief Operating Officer (COO)	Executive Leadership Team Member
CEO	Executive Leadership Team Member

Exact titles of the participants were not included to protect participant confidentiality.

The sample was not representative of the entire staff however, participation was evenly distributed among types of organizational roles and responsibilities (Table 1). A range of staff members with varying responsibilities agreed to be interviewed, including members of the executive and leadership teams, middle managers, program directors, and frontline workers. Since participants self-selected into the study, the researcher had no control over the types of positions included in or the variance of the sample. Interviews took place in private spaces within the organization or at the researcher's off-site office.

2.3. Data Collection

Interviews were guided by a constructivist grounded theory approach to data collection, which situates the research question and conceptual ideas of interest—in this case, managerialism—as starting points rather than endpoints. From the standpoint of constructivist grounded theory, pre-conceived ideas regarding the phenomenon in question serve simply as points of departure. Accordingly, the goal is to use research questions to help develop ideas rather than limit them. As such, concepts of interest and importance are developed from studying the data and engaging in various levels of analysis from the beginning of the research process (Charmaz 2006).

Participants were not asked to explicitly discuss their experiences with managerialist practices. Rather, they were asked to reflect upon their specific role in the organization and the challenges, if any, that accompany this role. This interview procedure aligns with a constructivist grounded theory approach to data collection, the methodological approach guiding this study.

2.4. Analysis Procedures

The data were analyzed using Constructivist Grounded Theory analysis techniques. The interviews were transcribed, and data coding commenced. Coding took place in two stages: the initial coding stage and the focused coding stage. The initial coding stage consisted of open, “line by line” coding. The purpose of this type of coding procedure is to “stay close” to the words of the participant to ensure the researcher is not labeling the data with any preconceived ideas or concepts that may skew the analysis (Charmaz 2014). Line-by-line coding was conducted at every interview.

Upon completing the open coding process, focused coding began. The goal of focused coding is to determine the adequacy of the codes developed in the initial, open coding stage. During this process, open codes were grouped according to conceptual and analytical similarities. This process yielded approximately 20 focused codes that were applied to all of the interviews. Managerialism served as a sensitizing concept throughout focused coding and subsequent analysis procedures to determine how and to what extent the experiences of the participants aligned with or diverged from managerialist ideology and practice.

3. Results

The following section presents findings that highlight the organization’s adoption of managerialist practices and the effects of these practices on the organization. Two prominent indicators of managerialism emerged from the data: (1) emphasis on efficiency and on meeting metrics and outputs, and (2) achieving substantial organizational growth. The staff described the environment as one in which meeting metrics and achieving organizational growth were stressed above all else, even if these goals were in direct conflict with best practices for meeting client needs.

3.1. Efficiency and Output Driven Measures

At the time of data collection, the organization was receiving approximately 70 percent of its funding through local, state, and federal contracts. Most government contracts include stipulations, such as how many clients should be served, the duration of services, and staffing ratios for individual programs. Often, contract compensation is linked to an agency’s ability to meet these metrics (Lu 2016). In one example provided by a director, a newly acquired contract with the Veterans Association was very specific about how the services related to the contract could be structured and provided. This participant stated, “[Staff] needed to get 1100 individuals into permanent housing within 90 days of the start of the contract. Each case manager was responsible for 30 to 40 clients at a time”. Another talked about contracts related to the local housing authority’s rapid rehousing initiatives. “Everything is rapid rehousing now, so those [contracts] get priority. . . according to the housing authority, rapid rehousing is ending homelessness, for say families, in 90 days”. When asked how realistic this outcome was, the participant stated, “it’s very unrealistic. . . You have homeless families that are, that have a lot of other issues besides homelessness”. The participant acknowledged that while housing is a priority, there are many other co-occurring concerns that families face when homeless, and attending to these needs may impede the ability of staff to transition families into housing within the 90 days.

In the era of performance measurement, quantitative outputs rather than substantive outcomes have become the mechanism through which funders determine a program’s success. While longer-term outcomes for clients and communities are not eliminated from the equation entirely, success for human service organizations is often measured through metrics such as the number of clients served within a given time (Baines 2006).

This was particularly true for this organization. One Associate Director explained with the following:

“Yeah so. . .you have a contract and it’s broken down by, say, this many people have to be enrolled, this many people have to move up to permanent housing, this many enrolled families have to increase their income or and sustain permanent housing. . .I’m very transparent with my staff and I let them know, “This is what the contract—the contract that you’re part of. . .these are the numbers”.

The mandate of efficiency and meeting quantitative outputs was often driven by specific contracts or grants. The organization has historically been a recipient of many local grants and contracts made possible through state-allocated funds. These contracts allowed the organization to become a major player in the field of homelessness throughout California. However, in most cases, stipulations and restrictions regarding service provision often proved to be, at best, very limiting. At worst, the organization was simply unable to perform the work they were tasked with doing. One executive staff member remarked the following:

“I think that particularly now in our line of work, in California as a whole, a lot of the outcomes that are expected or are imposed on homeless services providers are unrealistic. That may be part of the challenge right now, that the housing situation is just disastrous here. And so our ability to meet outcomes is dependent on these external factors that may not be [realistic]. There’s only so much that we can do”.

Another staff member in an associate director position explained:

“You might have done a lot of work with the case and really improved the person’s situation, but you might not get a positive outcome for the contract. . . It can be very unmotivating to staff sometimes, but my approach is to look at the bright side. . . It didn’t count as a permanent placement outcome but at least we’re getting a few other deliverables”.

The unrealistic nature of many goals set forth by contracts meant metrics went unmet. For many participants, this was not only frustrating, but they were also forced to redefine what success looks like. For one senior staff member, this meant having to accept that the services were often below standard. She explained, “So we’re just going to accept the level of, um I’ll use a word I’m not comfortable using, mediocrity. We have too many things going on, we can’t focus on that one thing. I think that that’s challenging and that has a trickle-down effect on staff and on clients”. Another staff member reported a similar sentiment when she said, “We don’t feel like we’re the best in the industry. At the director meeting, we agreed, we feel like we’re forced to do shitty work, and we wish we could do more”. Another participant, an executive at the agency, acknowledged the difficulties involved in having to meet metrics based on contracts. She explained as follows:

“Let’s just say a contract says that we can have a 1 to 35 caseload, but our program is telling us that that’s too much, it really needs to be 1 to 20. At times, we’ll make that decision, that even though we know it’s not perfect, we’re going to keep that 1 to 35 caseload. . .Well, are those extra fifteen clients on that caseload getting everything that they could be getting, everything that they deserve, that we as an organization should be giving them? I doubt it”.

In addition to a diminished quality of work, contract mandates also affected how programs were staffed and managed. Participants described never having enough staff to meet the demands of the contracts. Often, one person would be doing the job of two or more staff members, making it relatively impossible to meet goals and metrics. One participant described it as “mak[ing] one person do everything, because we don’t have enough people hired, or we don’t have the right budget right now”. Unreasonable staffing ratios led to staff feeling overworked and burnt out, which they described as directly affecting the quality of services received by clients. The expectations for the organization’s

recently awarded Rapid Rehousing contract illustrated this exact issue. One executive reported the following:

“They wanted you to be able to house a lot of people for not a lot of money, and they weren’t allowing for the staffing ratios that people think it’s gonna take to be able to make those outcomes. . . So they want to say that this huge investment has housed a huge number of people, so in turn they push that down to the nonprofits. But those nonprofits are saying you can’t house that many people with that amount of money”.

When explaining a newly acquired contract to house veterans, another participant remarked the following:

“For a long time, we weren’t allowed to refer anyone to the Housing Department because we had promised the VA that we would house like 300 veterans in three months. Which is the most unreasonable goal I have ever heard in my life. . . I can imagine that the VA said, “Do this for X amount of dollars”. “Of course, we’d love X amount of dollars, please give us X amount of dollars and we’ll do whatever it is that you ask”. I feel like that’s how [the organization] operates. Give us X number of dollars and we’ll do whatever you say. Just like a prostitute. Do we even have our own vision?”

Many described the “do more with less” attitude as permeating the organization and burnout was a common theme among the participants. One executive acknowledged that the organization “is known to have a culture of working people too hard”. Another explained as follows:

“Decisions are based on what looks good on paper, [which] does not always translate to practice. . . The impact [of this] is clients are served by staff that are either burnt out or staff that are going to burn themselves out. Maybe they’re doing great for a bit, but they burn themselves out”.

This metrics-driven culture also led to clients receiving less individualized services. One staff member mentioned that focusing on contract-stipulated goals and outcomes takes away the ability to focus on a client’s goals.

“Well, it’s very common for us when we go out into the field and we work with people in outreach, to be focused on housing, but that may not be their goal. They may just wanna get more money a month and they wanna stay where they’re at, so are we willing to help them get Social Security, or general relief, or find them a part-time job, or whatever? No, our goal is to house people. So it’s a big question. Are we driven by our outcomes? And are those outcomes really what matter in the lives of clients or not?”

Another stated, “The dynamic created and mandated by funders, who often decided the approach to the services and intervention, not only affected staff members and service delivery, but it also ultimately minimized clients’ self-determination”.

3.2. Organizational Growth

During data collection, the organization was undergoing a period of unfettered growth with their workforce expanding from approximately 100 to 400 employees across the state over two years. Staff members of various ranks within the organization identified funding sources as a catalyst for the growth. As opportunities arose, the organization attempted to secure money to support whatever policy initiatives were trending in the broader field of homeless services at the time. In one example, a staff member described the organization shifting its focus to permanent supportive housing initiatives, which, at the time, was emerging as an effective and innovative way to address the issue of homelessness. One participant explained with the following:

“We see the trends in the community. We see the trends in the funding, which is perhaps even more important because funders often guide policy on home-

lessness in general. We're noticing trends in which transitional housing, or the shelter as we know it, may not be around too long in the future. The funding is more for permanent housing".

As funding priorities shifted, many participants explained that it seemed critical to go after every funding opportunity that arose, regardless of the focus of the contract or grant. As such, programs could be expanded or added at any given time to meet the demand funders were placing on the organization to compete for contracts, which was one factor contributing to expansive growth in a short period.

On the other hand, the ever-shifting priorities of funders around service provision often meant that financial support for existing programs could be reduced or eliminated entirely, with very little notice. Participants described feeling like at any given moment, existing programs may lose government funding, being forced to shut down entirely. This not only creates uncertainty for staff, services, and subsequently clients, are directly affected. One participant explained the following:

"I don't think it's a secret, but I guess shelter funding throughout LA county is just dwindling. We've been really pushing to keep our shelters open, but the funding is not focused on transitional housing anymore, shelter beds anymore, so unfortunately they had to make the decision of closing down one of our shelters. So that's big, that's a really big thing".

Another staff member observed the following: "Now everyone's talking about healthcare. Now homelessness is a healthcare issue, and in fact let's use healthcare dollars to fund services. So we have hired a consultant to help, because we're not a healthcare agency. We've gone through our own internal sense of what that means for us. Do we become a health clinic, do we contract out, what do we do? But that's the same concept that we have to constantly change how we do things or we go out of business".

According to one executive, large organizations providing a wide variety of programs tend to fare better when funding is cut because they are more equipped to absorb the financial burden. For this organization in particular, much of the organization's growth was in response to the need to diversify programs, to be innovative with services to match funding opportunities, and to expand the organization so unexpected or quick shifts in funding priorities did not force the organization into financial distress the way it might a smaller agency. While executives had a clear sense of why growth was necessary, to the front-line staff like case managers, the goals of rapid expansion were often unclear. When asked about the reasons for the growth, one case manager responded, "Cause we want to be the cool big kids on the block, I don't know. I don't know how they came to decide that we should have fucking 15 sites and 350 employees. I just made that number up, but I don't know how they decided that was a good idea. . . it just feels like ego".

The unencumbered growth that the organization had experienced over the past few years had a dramatic effect on both staff members and service delivery. According to many staff members, while the organization was expanding to new locations and taking on new programs, the internal infrastructure remained stagnant and under prioritized. The organization failed to put in place a human resources department that could accommodate the constant processes and onboarding and training of new staff. Access to technology, such as laptops, phones, and a proper cloud service did not expand proportionately to the growth, making even simple tasks seem impossible. One director-level staff member highlighted this issue when she said the following:

"We need more structure, everyone needs IT stuff. We need everything. One good example of this is the fact that until two years ago, we have one server. We had one server and then it was crashing everyday and everyone's like, 'Why?' Well it's because three hundred and fifty people are on it and it's meant for eighty five".

Lacking access to basic supplies kept many staff members from properly doing their jobs, which was reported as resulting in lower quality and inefficient services. For example, when the national movement to provide services for unhoused veterans created new

funding opportunities, the organization was eager to secure a high-paying contract to expand services to veterans. While successful in securing this funding source, staff members described the organization as highly unprepared to take on such a large new program. One program director noted, “You had these staff come on board with no training and have to work from an office that didn’t even work. There were no lights, there’s no building, there’s no internet, there’s no phones, there’s no, like, printer”. Another stated the following:

“We just upgraded our donor database and we’ve been using the same database for fifteen years, which is woefully inadequate. I think that’s a common thing [here]. Other things around the organization have a desperate need of improvement, like our phone systems, our IT systems, or things that affect everybody within the organization”.

For many staff, organizational growth was understood as contributing to disconnection between departments and between different locations. As the organization continued to rapidly expand, staff members reported feeling unsure about who they should reach out to for assistance, which often resulted in disrupted workflow. When asked about how the growth had affected employees, one staff member observed the following:

“When you’re smaller you kinda know all the departments, and you know how everything runs. Now it’s expanded so greatly that sometimes there’s a disconnect between all the different locations and all the different departments. Maybe some of the other departments aren’t aware of what the other departments do”.

Propper staffing also became an issue during this period of expansion. When the organization created new programs, the administrative overhead needed to hire a new staff member to run the program was often not provided. Instead, existing staff members would have their job duties expanded to accommodate the new program. An executive staff member recalled the following:

“We have a new program and there’s funds for that program, but there aren’t funds to hire someone to run it. And then we sit at this table and we decide, ‘Ok that’s a big program, it needs someone to run it full time, but we don’t have that money. Even though you’re already working fifty or sixty hours a week, we’re going to ask you to do it”.

This lack of financial support to institute new programs or initiatives is often a direct result of contract restrictions around allowable expenditures. One executive staff member described, “You submit a budget [with the contract], but they have allowable costs or non-allowable costs. Usually, you’re only allowed to have a 10% overhead which is barely enough to cover the finance people, the HR people, and it’s not really. Usually, we’re subsidizing the real administrative costs”. Another senior staff member expressed a similar sentiment, explaining the following:

“What ends up happening is you have your growth trajectory, revenue-wise, and then you have all those support systems within the organization that should be trailing that and growing with it, and I think that’s a difficult commitment to make. So what ends up happening is you struggle, morale is affected, you burn people out, you don’t have the resources to do some of the programs well, and then it becomes a test of your staff”.

During this time of expansion, turnover was high among employees, which many attributed to staff feeling burned out. One executive staff member commented, “I think one of the challenges right now is morale and burnout because it never feels like there’s a break. . . we’ve been growing so much for so long. We are at about 30% turnover rate every year, and that’s really high”. When the organization first began working with the veteran population there was a high level of buy-in from both the community and the clients to obtain secure housing for unhoused veterans. However, the program started to fail when experienced staff members left the organization. In describing this particular instance, one participant at the director level stated the following:

“Now the fallout is the retention rate, because clients are falling out of established housing. [The contract] had to happen so quickly, and these people who had just gotten their MSWs and worked with this temp company are doing the case management. You start seeing the ramifications: we have a lot of veterans falling out of housing and the staff turnover rate was phenomenal. I don’t know any of the original staff now. So then what happens is the veteran is like, ‘Whatever,’ because relationships are important in this work. If you have five case managers within two months, they’re going to be like, ‘What is this stupid case management?’ They’re not going to have that person that they feel comfortable going to all of the time”.

It is clear that the unprecedented rate of growth experienced by the organization adversely affected both staff and service delivery. This growth, coupled with the emphasis placed on efficiency and metrics, affected staff significantly. In turn, service provision was negatively affected as well.

4. Discussion

The role that managerialism plays as well as the effects of managerialist ideology and practices on the functioning of homeless service organizations is evidenced through participants’ recounting of the organization’s hyper-focus on efficiency and outcome-driven performance measurement, as well as the overly ambitious goals surrounding organizational growth. Both of these indicators are shown to result to both result from and reinforce managerialism ([Abramovitz and Zelnick 2020](#)). The experiences of study participants suggest a clearly defined process, whereby managerialist processes become operationalized and embedded within the organization. Further, a reciprocal relationship between staff experiences and service outcomes is observed. When services are negatively influenced by managerialist practices, staff are also adversely affected. When managerialist ideology and practices negatively affect the staff, as is suggested by the findings, services also suffer.

For this organization in particular, contracting was the primary conduit through which managerialist ideology was translated into practice. Heavily reliant upon local and state funding, mostly in the form of contracts, many staff members described feeling like the organization was highly restricted in the types of services and how services could be provided. While this was due, in part, to the introduction of the Housing First model at the national level, the restrictiveness was less about the model itself and more about realizing the goals of Housing First. To ensure metrics related to the implementation of the Housing First model were met, the leadership at the organization became preoccupied with performance measurement and organizational growth. As many of the participants noted, leadership included, this preoccupation led many to feel like the organization was not meeting its mission-related goals or working in service to the overall mission and vision of the organization.

Goals related to the number of clients served over a period of time were defined not by what was realistic or understood about serving clients experiencing homelessness, but by what funding sources deemed acceptable. For many employees, these numbers were seen as arbitrary and were understood to be derived from standards related to performance and efficiency, not knowledge about effective service delivery or in accordance with Housing First principles and ethical service provision.

Mandates surrounding efficiency and productivity standards affected service provision in two distinct ways. First, staff reported feeling deeply affected by the emphasis placed on client numbers and other service-related metrics. As professionals, many of whom possessed a wealth of experience and had advanced degrees in social work or other related professions, the participants were keenly aware of the shortcomings of this approach. Their experience working with people experiencing chronic homelessness and other co-occurring challenges meant they understood how much time was needed to provide clients with sufficient services based on individual needs. Time and time again, staff reported feeling

like they were confined to a system that did not allow them to provide the level and quality of service they knew was necessary to ensure people's needs were met effectively and in accordance with their professional values.

Furthermore, as professionals who were deeply committed to the mission of the organization, providing what some described as "mediocre" services posed a sort of "crisis of conscience" that led to staff feeling conflicted, frustrated, and exhausted. While burnout is not uncommon for human service professionals, for many staff, feelings of burnout were associated with having to stretch resources, both human and financial, to meet efficiency-driven goals and metrics. Not only did this result in personal challenges for the individual staff members, but it also meant that the staff faced considerable difficulty in providing high-quality services.

Growth-related goals were experienced similarly. Although the organizational expansion was not explicitly dictated by contracts per se, staff understood that to remain competitive for funding and to ensure their legitimacy in the field of homeless services (Mano and Rosenberg 2014; Hasenfeld 2010) the organization would need to continue to increase the number of people they were able to serve. To accomplish this, the expansion of programs, as well as the organization overall, was viewed by leadership as necessary. Staff members in leadership and executive positions acknowledged the risk they faced by not continuing to grow the organization's capacity. If they were observed as not having the capacity to meet ever-increasing demand they risked not being able to secure contracts and grants in the future. Like all nonprofit organizations, operations were dependent upon the ability to continue to obtain funding from external sources. If an organization's capacity and legitimacy are seen as uncertain by external stakeholders, they risk losing funding opportunities and the very likelihood of remaining in existence comes into question.

The findings from this study demonstrate two explicit processes by which managerialism is operationalized within homeless service agencies. While efficiency and growth are not inherently problematic, in the context of this organization, neither appeared to work in the best interest of the organization or the people they served. As long as performance measurement and organizational growth—as defined through managerialist ideology and principles—continue to be viewed as critical to organizational success, interrogations into the effectiveness of this approach will remain needed. Further, the ethical implications of managerialist practices related to performance measurement and organizational growth must be explored.

The considerable effects of managerialism on organizational functioning, while important, is not the only implication of institutionalized managerialist ideology observed. If we are to understand managerialism's full consequences, the incongruence between managerialism and the goals of the human services sector more generally must be acknowledged (Abramovitz and Zelnick 2020). Human service agencies exist to serve vulnerable populations. In the United States, many of these services are provided by nonprofit organizations. These organizations often have explicit vision statements related to solving the social problem for which they exist. The vision of the organization in this study, for example, centered on envisioning a world where homelessness does not exist². However, it is evident from the participants' experiences that realizing this vision may be impossible. The mission statement was equally as lofty, and while staff understood that the organization would likely not solve the problem of homelessness, it was clear from the participants' experiences that meeting mission-related goals was often extremely difficult.

The findings from the study not only show how managerialism becomes operationalized within the context of homeless services, but they also demonstrate the ways in which managerialism leads to unintended consequences related to service delivery. In many cases, staff were not able to meet their responsibilities due to the difficulties they faced. As a result, service provision, and ultimately the individuals and families utilizing the services, are affected. It can therefore be argued that the organization is, in effect, working against, not toward, its mission. In doing so, managerialism can be observed as not only preventing the

organization from actualizing its goals, but also maintaining and, in some cases, potentially exacerbating the problem the agency exists to solve.

4.1. Implications and Future Directions

This study contributes to the growing understanding of how managerialism becomes operationalized within nonprofit human service agencies, especially organizations serving individuals and families experiencing homelessness. Specifically, insight into two tenets of managerialism, efficiency and performance measurement, and organizational growth are gained. Since the provision of homeless services in the United States is often directly connected to government contracts and grants, it is fair to assume that other homeless service agencies are facing similar challenges. As such, this study provides critical insights into some of the unique challenges related to the adoption and implementation of managerialism that may be faced by homeless services agencies. Furthermore, these findings can potentially shed light on the difficulties faced by other types of human service agencies since reliance on government contracts and grants is not unique to organizations serving the unstably housed.

There are several practical implications of this research as well. While more research on the relationship between government contracting and managerialism is needed, the findings point to a possible association between reliance on government funding and highly managerialized organizations. Examining this relationship further can be useful to organizational leadership and those responsible for making decisions regarding funding, program development, and service implementation.

The potential relationship between managerialism and government funding also asks us to consider whether organizational challenges resulting from the adherence to managerialist ideology and practice can be examined under the premise of infrastructure failure ([Allegrante and Sleet 2021](#)). Although nonprofit social service organizations are not typically considered part of public health infrastructure in the conventional sense, legislative initiatives designed to meet the needs of those affected by public health crises, like homelessness, are often filtered to those in need through private organizations. For example, the USD 1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package included USD 5 billion dedicated to providing grants to state and local governments that addressed critical needs such as the shortage of affordable housing, the increasing cost of rent, temporary and permanent supportive housing, and services to assist those at risk of falling into homelessness or already homeless individuals and families ([Allegrante and Sleet 2021](#)).

Much of this funding was allocated to local organizations, such as the United Way in greater Los Angeles, whose Pandemic Relief Fund was used to “support the County’s unsheltered residents who were especially vulnerable to the coronavirus, and low-income individuals, students, and families at imminent risk of homelessness and hardships due to the health and economic impacts of the coronavirus ([COVID-19: Response Funds 2024](#)). These programs were funded through federal legislation aimed at strengthening and improving infrastructure in an attempt to avert a public health crisis. Thus, if we posit that government contracting and grantmaking as they currently exist lead to highly managerialized organizations, and managerialism results in unintended adverse consequences for service delivery, then it is reasonable to consider that organizational challenges related to managerialism result in the failure of infrastructure to support the health and well-being of those who are experiencing or are at risk of becoming homeless. Understanding the effects of managerialism through the lens of infrastructure failure provides researchers with unique and useful approach to expand our understanding of managerialism within the nonprofit sector. It also presents an opportunity to engage questions related to the effects of managerialism through a public health lens.

The information gained from this study about staff experiences related to efficiency standards and organizational growth also provides critical insights into some of the ways managerialism is adversely affecting employees in human service organizations. Though not referred to as such, participants recounted many instances where managerialism,

as defined in the literature, directly affected how they accomplished their work. The negative experiences faced by many of the employees, and the subsequent implications for services described, suggest that practices rooted in managerialist ideology do not always support staff in meeting organizational goals. Further, it is evident from the findings that managerialism may lead to unintended adverse effects on staff health and well-being. While burnout and secondary traumatic stress among human service workers, especially those working with populations experiencing homelessness, is well documented ([Mueller and Morley 2020](#); [Schiff and Lane 2021](#)) the relationship between managerialist practices and burnout presents an opportunity for a novel area of research.

Addressing the high rates of burnout among human service workers through the lens of managerialism enables an exploration of burnout from a systemic perspective rather than the individual perspective. In other words, rather than locating burnout as a problem of an individual(s), the onus of remedying the causes and impact of burnout is instead placed on the organization rather than the individual's experiencing burnout. Burnout is thus reframed as a systemic problem rather than that of a person's choices or behaviors. Finally, as the first of its kind, the study provides unique insights into how managerialism affects homeless service organizations specifically. However, since the findings are only representative of staff members at one agency, more research examining the operationalization of managerialism within homeless service organizations is needed.

4.2. Limitations

Since the findings from this study cannot be generalized to the broader population, drawing conclusions about how managerialism affects homeless service organizations must be made with caution. Research shows that managerialism influences the field of human services more generally. This study contributes to the broader conversation on the subject. However, since the study only included the experiences of 16 staff members, it is difficult to ascertain whether these experiences would be similar to employees working in other homeless services organizations. As such, additional research specifically on the relationship between managerialism and homeless services agencies is needed.

5. Conclusions

This study highlights the unique ways that managerialism is operationalized in a homeless services agency through common organizational practices, such as securing funding and expanding the organization. Having an awareness of the role and implications of managerialism may be necessary to both prevent and mitigate the problem. However, the proliferation of managerialist ideology in our economic and social systems makes challenging this paradigm difficult. Furthermore, challenging the ubiquity of managerialism requires a significant shift in thinking that will likely be difficult to enact, particularly among those who wield financial power over human service agencies, namely government entities. However, if the full capacity of human service organizations is to be realized, it is necessary to interrogate both the ubiquity and utility of managerialist ideology and practice. One way of doing so is for researchers to concentrate on better understanding how managerialism is understood and received by different organizational stakeholders, perhaps most notably, funders and organizational leadership.

While every participant in this study discussed experiencing managerialism, the biggest disconnect regarding the effects of managerialism exists between staff at lower organizational levels and those who possess greater degrees of decision-making power. For those at the top of the organizational structure, managerialism is understood as necessary to maintain operations and meet organizational goals. Staff at lower organizational levels, namely program managers and front-line workers, understand the necessity of managerialism. However, these workers are more apt to think critically about the inherent assumption that managerial practice is the most effective way to achieve outcomes. Gaining greater insight into why the different organizational stakeholders experience managerialism in particular ways will provide useful information not just for understanding the phenomenon

but also in developing organizational interventions to counteract some of the negative implications of managerialism on human service agencies.

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Notes

- ¹ The Continuums of Care (CoC) Program through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is designed to promote community-wide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness by providing funding for efforts by nonprofit providers and state and local governments and promoting access to and effect utilization of mainstream programs by homeless individuals and families.
- ² The exact vision statement was not included to protect the confidentiality of the organization.

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