EFFECTIVELY WORKING WITH CHALLENGING CLIENTS WHO RECEIVE HUNGER SERVICE ASSISTANCE: CASE EXAMPLES AND EIGHT RECOMMENDED GUIDELINES

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Abstract. *Those who provide services for people who experience food insecurity come into contact with people who do not always present themselves courteously and favorably. Using case examples from the food bank industry, the authors of this paper will: (1) discuss why people sometimes behave discourteously when seeking assistance from human service professionals; (2) give case examples of how social workers could properly respond to these situations and, (3) give recommendations for effectively working with this client population.*

Among the beautiful aspects of the profession of social work are the myriad of settings in which one can practice and the diversity of people for whom services are provided. This includes those who provide services for the diverse group of people who experience poverty, food insecurity, and hunger. Poverty measurements, although often criticized by many for being too liberal, are typically established by the federal government's Health and Human Services department (Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Food insecurity, which is directly tied to poverty, is evident whenever: 1) the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods is limited or uncertain, or 2) the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain (e.g., avoiding having to scavenge through dumpsters for food or selling blood for food) (Derrickson & Brown, 2002; Kempson, Keenan, Sadani, & Adler, 2003; Seavey & Sullivan, 2001). This insecurity then results in hunger, oftentimes on a chronic basis for many individuals (Nord, Andrews & Winicki, 2002). Seeking social services to meet this unmet need may be the only option for some of these individuals despite the fact that reliance on governmental and social agency support is often associated with humiliation, dehumanization, denigration, depression, and shame (Belle, 2003). Therefore, it is not surprising to find that not all people who seek assistance for hunger relief present themselves courteously and favorably. This small group of clients who demonstrate negative behavior, however, must be examined in the context of their circumstances. The person-in-environment perspective asserts that a person's actions and behaviors are influenced by their environment (Longress, 2000). The professional helper has the responsibility of creating an environment where

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clients feel safe, respected, and valued (Brille & Levine, 2005). Therefore, it becomes incumbent upon human service providers to consider external and internal factors that may impact client behavior during service delivery.

This paper is intended to fill in gaps in knowledge about the extraneous and intrinsic factors that impact upon client persona and how social workers and others who provide human services, such as students and volunteers (Poindexter, Valentine & Conway, 1999), can be more effective in responding to difficult clients who need assistance with the issue of hunger. Using two case examples from the food bank industry, the authors of this paper will: (1) discuss why people sometimes behave discourteously when seeking assistance from human service professionals; (2) give case examples of best practices with this type of client; and, (3) give recommendations for effectively working with this population.

POVERTY, FOOD INSECURITY, AND HUNGER IN AMERICA

Although the United States is one of the wealthiest industrialized countries, and rich in food in the world, millions of Americans remain in poverty and suffer from food insecurity (Belle, 2003; Biggerstaff, Morris & Nichols-Casebolt, 2002). According to the 2005 Health and Human Services poverty guidelines, a family of three or five, whose annual income is at $16,090 or $22,610, respectively, is considered impoverished (Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). In 2001, over 31 million or 11.3% of Americans lived below the poverty line. In 2001, Second Harvest, a national network and the largest organization of food banks and food rescue programs in this country (Bernstein, 2001; Biggerstaff, Morris & Nichols-Casebolt, 2002), conducted a study in which 32,759 people from 32 states were interviewed regarding the issue of hunger. The study found that approximately 11 million households, or over 36 million people, have limited access to adequate food resources (Sullivan & Choi, 2002). Of the 36 million people who have hunger issues, 14 million are children 18 years of age and under (Biggerstaff, Morris & Nichols-Casebolt, 2002). Each week approximately seven million people receive food from food banks and food rescue programs (Sullivan & Choi, 2002). Although most of these individuals are from persistently low income or no income families, some of these individuals include former six figure tech workers who have been laid off (Berner & Zellner, 2003), families of military personnel (*"Pantries Provide Backup for Some Military Families,"* 2004), and unemployed college graduates (Berner & Zellner, 2003).

The issue of hunger among United States residents was further detailed by the 2004 Sodexho USA Hunger and Homelessness Survey which found that among the 1,139 U.S. cities with populations of 30,000 or more, 56 percent of those who seek emergency food assistance were families, 34 percent of adults who seek hunger assistance services held jobs, and sadly, an average of 20 percent of requests for emergency food went unmet over the past year (U.S. Mayor Newspaper, 2005). A significant number of the households researched in 1998 by the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS) found that 66% of the households classified as food insecure experienced this on a re-occurring basis for the year, while 20% experienced food insecurity on a frequent or chronic basis during the respective year (Nord, Andrews,

& Winicki, 2002). Fortunately, there are a variety of agencies that provide private food assistance. They include food banks, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and food pantries. Food banks are charitable organizations that receive food from a variety of places and subsequently distribute that food to shelters, soup kitchens, and food pantries. These agencies and organizations then distribute the food to those in need. Food pantries provide non-prepared food and groceries to those in need, who then prepare the food at home. Soup kitchens, which are also referred to as emergency kitchens, provide prepared meals to clients, while emergency shelters provide clients with shelter and a daily meal on a short-term basis (Tiehen, 2002). Most of these food relief agencies are faith-based (Cashwell, Bartkowski, Duffy, Casanova, Molnar, & Irimia-Vladu, 2004).

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CLIENT BEHAVIOR

Historically and presently, American society has been punitive towards the less fortunate. The poor, disadvantaged, and people who seek social work assistance have been and are often blamed for their plight and are targets of oppression (Early & GlenMaye, 2000). Although a formal social welfare system now assists those in need and the less fortunate, these individuals still meet with resistance and disparaging attitudes sometimes when seeking assistance with problems and unmet needs (Poindexter, Valentine & Conway, 1999). The authors submit, therefore, that the client is not always at fault for having a negative attitude towards human service professionals. Not every helping professional is unbiased or free of preconceived ideas about their clients, especially those clients who are poor. Some actually hold very negative attitudes towards clients (Rehner, Ishee, Salloum & Velasues, 1997). Some view the poor and people with low-incomes as lazy, unconcerned, and undeserving. Creating environments and learning experiences that help people to be sensitive to the needs of disadvantaged populations is in part why the social work curriculum focuses on populations at risk (CSWE, 1994). Whatever the condition that necessitates clients to seek help, social workers and other skilled helpers should remember that it takes a lot of courage, pride, and inner-strength for many people to admit that they need help and then to seek services. Helping professionals have given themselves a challenge. Under their own volition they have sought the necessary training and credentials to work with clients who are in need. By doing so, they have indicated a willingness to work with all types of people, some of whom will not always appear to appreciate what is being done on their behalf.

Besides the attitudes and actions of some insensitive and/or biased service providers, there are a number of circumstances that can account for a client's negative behavior towards a service provider. For instance, a primary familial role is the socialization of children to societal expectation, norms, and shared values (Hutchison, 1999). Extending simple courtesies such as "thank you", "please" or "excuse me" by parents and significant others is something that is taught. Not all individuals, however, are taught these courtesies as children and therefore do not subsequently offer these courtesies as adults on a regular basis. For the exceptional client who does not come from a persistently impoverished background,

he or she may exhibit negative behaviors because of pride. Having to resort to human service agencies to have one's basic needs for food met by others can be a humiliating and dissonant experience. Consequently, these individuals may lash out inappropriately out of shame, frustration, or because they may have unrealistic expectations about the services that food service agencies will provide. Others may act in a discourteous manner due to negative life situations (i.e., persistent poverty, child abuse, domestic violence, mental illness, chemical addiction, etc.) from which they have not recovered. As a result, some of these individuals may have unresolved issues that get acted out when they seek assistance. For example, there are times when people are not coping well with life situations, are ill and experiencing feelings of discomfort, are tired and irritable by the time they reach the agency as a result of transportation challenges, or are just plain stressed. Stress is probably the number one mitigating factor for unfavorable behaviors of clients seeking hunger assistance.

Poverty and all of the ails that accompany it breeds stress. Stress can result in a number of negative behaviors, especially when it is compounded by food insecurity and the resulting hunger it produces. According to Ulrich (2002), impoverished individuals suffer from a gamut of negative conditions and environmental demands. Ulrich suggests that the individual who seeks hunger assistance may also be in need of money for clothing, safe and noise-free housing, transportation, child care provisions, utilities, and automobile expenses, just to name a few. This high level of stress may then present itself as hostility towards the service provider when seeking to fulfill one of these unmet needs.

It is only normal for the human body to respond to the alarms it sends off (i.e., seeking food when hungry) (Perry, 2001). This alarm may exacerbate the stress level for food pantry users, however, when hunger needs are not swiftly met because the food pantry is only available on certain dates, at certain locations, and at certain times (Wallace, 2003) or when clients have to wait for extended periods of time in inclement weather. The individual's lack of control of his or her environment may then lead to poor self-regulation and an inappropriate response (Perry, 2001). An individual who demonstrates healthy regulations possesses the capacity to tolerate distress associated with an unmet need (Perry, 2001). Development of a healthy regulation, however, comes with time and assurance that these needs will be satisfactorily met in a timely manner like it is for a crying hungry baby who is soothed and fed by a loved one when hungry (Perry, 2001). This is not always the case for individuals living with food insecurity and hunger. Hunger, or the physical feeling of discomfort that results from being food deprived (*"Role of Clinicians in Helping Patients to Achieve Food Security,"* 2002), is a reality for millions of Americans on a daily basis.

A Case Example – Mrs. Price

The following real case illustrates the kind of situation a social worker may encounter when working with food bank clients who exhibit difficult behavior. The authors make recommendations for effective client relations when dealing with such a situation. The case is based upon an experience that one of the authors had while serving for four years as a

volunteer at an organization that provides food products to agencies that address the issue of hunger within their communities. The names of the organization and client have been changed to protect anonymity.

The United Community Food Bank Center is a non-profit agency, located in a major metropolitan area, which serves as a distribution center for over 400 member agencies that supply prepared and unprepared food to hungry individuals and families. The venues through which clients receive their food include soup kitchens, emergency shelters, and food pantries. Mrs. Price is a 45-year-old White, divorced female who is the mother of four children ages 17, 15, 8, and 6. All of her children reside with her. They occupy a three-bedroom apartment and receive federal housing rent subsidy that covers their rent expense. Her only income is the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) of $545.00 that she receives monthly as a result of a car accident that left her permanently disabled. She does not know the whereabouts of her former husband and does not receive any financial support from him. They were divorced four months before the birth of her youngest child. The government food stamp assistance of $497.00 per month that she receives does not adequately cover her family's monthly food need. Therefore, she supplements her food stamp assistance with food items that she receives from a local food pantry that receives food product from the United Community Food Bank Center. She has used this community food pantry for the past six months since being referred here by a neighbor.

Mrs. Price complained to a neighbor that she was upset about the type of groceries that were being distributed by the food pantry, stating that "there was nothing in the bag and very little in previous bags that could be used." She further asserted that the pantry staff sometimes asked her invasive questions about the father of her children and that she felt looked down upon by staff because of her low income status. During a heated argument with the social worker, who served as the pantry distribution manager at the time of her last distribution of food, she profusely used profanity and threatened to turn the agency in to the Better Business Bureau. She had to be asked to leave and was subsequently escorted from the food pantry. She vowed to never return and has not been seen since. The social worker was very irate about the incident. She suggested that her staff refer Mrs. Price to another food pantry should she return.

Discussion of Mrs. Price

Many individuals were taught to believe that an individual's economic limitations stem from their own personal deficits, that the economically disadvantaged are exceptions in an other- wise functional set of social arrangements, and that these individuals will become productive contributors to society, capable of personal responsibility by receiving counseling, education, socialization, acculturation, and rehabilitation. When social workers hold these beliefs, mutually produced, authentic communication is often hampered during the helping relationship (Rose, 2000). They also become agents of social control, maintaining the inequitable status quo by placating an otherwise dangerous population of "have-nots" (Wood & Middleman, 1989, p. 26).

In this case, it is important for the social worker to realize that Mrs. Price might see the social worker as a control agent who is maintaining the status quo or she may be angry about her position in life. Although it is sometimes difficult to pause when a client is being difficult, it is important to do so. The social worker must not be defensive and realize that discourteous client behavior is not necessarily a result of any action on the part of the helping professional. They should take time to gain a better understanding of the client's feelings. It is also important that the social worker not interrupt, argue, or pass judgment on the client (Finn & Jacobson, 2003). Active listening is perhaps the most important skill of communication. According to Finn and Jacobson (2003), "Active listening calls on us to shed our own agendas and resist the temptation to leap to interpretation too soon" (p. 203). When the client does express affects in words, the worker can make congruent statements, such as in this case: "it must be hard trying to take care of four children all by yourself", or "not being able to get the quality of food that you think you should must be frustrating" or "it must feel awful to think that people are meddling in your personal business when you are just trying to get help feeding your family." This skill helps to communicate to the client the social worker's understanding of and empathy towards the client's dilemma. The social worker does not need to feel that he/she is necessarily agreeing with the client or submitting to inappropriate behavior, but instead is simply helping to prevent a sensitive situation from escalading.

Mrs. Price is facing several challenges. Even though Mrs. Price's primary concern is food insecurity, it is important for the social worker to understand the comprehensiveness of her situation. Hence, the social worker can also use the skill of partializing the client's situation. Partializing involves taking the whole client situation, breaking the many components of the big problem into smaller parts, and verbalizing them. For instance, it is important not only for the social worker to realize, but to dialogue with Mrs. Price about the strengths and hardships of being a 45-year-old, divorced, single parent who is disabled with four children to care for. Further discussion about the adequacy or inadequacy of her Supplemental Security Income and food stamps should also take place. This skill helps the social worker to better understand the impact of the myriad of problems faced by the client and communicates to the client that the social worker has an understanding of the problem. At that point an exploration of resources and referrals can take place.

In Mrs. Price's case, any one or a combination of these variables may have caused her response to the social worker. There are times when a person's behavior is not a result of their present experience. For instance, Mrs. Price was stressed over not being able to sufficiently provide for her family; she expressed shame of having to use a food pantry and she was experiencing interpersonal conflict(s) with her children. Her outburst was a release of frustration that was clearly related to stress regarding her personal life and not anger about the food that she received. The social worker may have missed an opportunity to assess her situation and make appropriate referrals.

A Case Example - Ms. Young.

Ms. Young is a 25-year-old, homeless African-American woman living in transitional housing. She has five children ages 6, 5, 4, 3, and 2. Ms. Young had her first child when she was 18 years old. Her only source of income is TANF. She has not yet applied for food stamp assistance. She became homeless after leaving the residence that she shared with a boyfriend who became abusive. Ms. Young had many challenges when she began to access the homeless services community. She and her five children were forced to rely on family members who really did not want to help her. She was always afraid that someone would tell her former boyfriend where she and the children were. She feared that her homeless status would be reported to the Cabinet for Families and Children and that her parental rights would be terminated. Ms. Young's only mode of transportation was public transportation.

Ms. Young was advised to apply for emergency food assistance through her local food pantry. The food products that she would receive would be designed to hold her over until she could be granted food stamps while she was living in transitional housing. Ms. Young scheduled an appointment to apply for food assistance, but was told that she would have to wait for two days until the next regularly scheduled food distribution date. She was given an 8:30 A.M. morning appointment. Ms. Young had arranged childcare so that she could attend her appointment, but the childcare provider was late, forcing Ms. Young to arrive one-half hour late to her food assistance appointment. Upon arrival, Ms. Young was visibly upset, frowning, and wearing noticeably wrinkled clothing. The food assistance worker agreed to see Ms. Young even though she was late. At the beginning of the meeting with the food assistance case manager, Ms. Young began to talk aggressively to the worker and discussed everything that had gone wrong for her that morning. Ms. Young began to speak loudly, frown more, cry, and even pace back and forth in the room.

Discussion of Ms. Young

The case manager made a decision to provide the client with services and employed effective social work practice skills while doing so. First, the case manager used the skill of positioning. Positioning is intended to provide a social-emotional environment congenial to connection and rapport (Hepworth, Rooney & Larsen, 2002; Wood & Middleman, 1989). He warmly introduced himself and turned his body to position himself to look at the client as the client was talking. The case manager then made eye contact with the client and gave her occasional nods and unobtrusive "uh-huhs" that told her that she was being observed and encouraged to say more (Finn & Jackson, 2003; Wood & Middleman, 1989). When the client observed that the worker was listening and encouraging, and not discouraging her from saying more, she relaxed and took her seat. The social worker then began to convey to the client that he was in touch with her feelings by telling her that he understood that it is indeed often difficult to find reliable childcare when appointments need to be met. The client was then able to relax and give attention to what she was there to accomplish--receiving food assistance. After a discussion of other stressors in her life and possible ways in which

they could be addressed, the session ended positively with both the client and social worker departing from each other in a relaxed and congenial manner. The client left the social worker feeling satisfied and respected. The social worker was able to honestly and directly speak to the client's mistrust and invite the client's participation in a way that built mutual trust and understanding (Finn & Jacobson, 2003).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS AND OTHER HUMAN SERVICE PROVIDERS

To be effective with clients it is necessary to use good verbal and nonverbal communication skills, to treat clients in a fair and equitable manner, and to create a supportive environment for food distribution. To this end, it is suggested that social workers and other human service providers:

1. *Know your clients.* Take the time to get to know some of the personal nuances about your clients. Many of them come to your agency on a continuous basis. As a result, you have the opportunity to observe their demeanor. Over time you should become familiar with how to best approach a particular client. You can use an ice-breaker to make the client feel welcomed each time they come for service. Ask about the client's general state of well-being, thereby conveying a sense of caring about the client while simultaneously observing their nonverbal response. This could help you to understand how best to approach and respond to them.

2. *Attend to communication.* Be aware of the nonverbal messages that you may be sending to your clients. Two-thirds of all communications are nonverbal (Brille, 2005). Non-verbal communications include tone of voice, gestures and movements, physical appearance, and environment. Sometimes a client's behavior may be in response to the non-verbal signals that you are sending. Human service professionals are not unlike others who at any given time may have a myriad of roles and responsibilities that they are juggling. As a result, they may be experiencing stress and unknowingly project this feeling onto the client (Poindexter, Valentine & Conway, 1999). This may be particularly evident when working in overcrowded environments, such as food pantries, where there are often long lines of people who are sometimes frustrated with having to stand in line in various weather conditions to receive service and who as a result sometimes conduct themselves in discourteous ways.

3. *Elicit feedback.* The authors suggest that it is helpful to elicit and then give serious consideration to client's feedback regarding their perception of how welcoming you and your agency are. Negative feedback should not be viewed as threatening, but should be considered an avenue and opportunity for agency modification and growth (Germain, 1994). From time-to-time it is necessary to do a critical analysis of the services that you are providing and how well you are providing them. A client's comments about the quality and type of food received may provide valuable feedback about the usability and suitability of the food that is distributed. Perhaps there are other recipients who share but do not express their sentiments. Sometimes clients take the food that is being distributed only to later throw away what they cannot use. Receiving clients' feedback may help eliminate food waste that could be used by others.

Being responsive to client feedback can also prevent client dissatisfaction overall and avoidance by others of the agency (Goodman & Blanchard, 1998).

4. *Check your rules.* Have reasonable rules and guidelines that clients are expected to follow. If an individual refuses to comply with the rules of your agency, rather than argue, tell them to come back at another time or refer them to another agency. You must expect to receive the same respect from your clients that you give to them, thereby discouraging negative client behavior. It is appropriate to ask a verbally abusive client to leave the agency. Allowing bad behavior to continue will signal to other clients that inappropriate behavior is acceptable and/or tolerated. In the future, other clients may respond similarly when disgruntled.

5. *Keep a structured environment.* Maintain a supportive but businesslike environment. Once you have distributed the food products, ask the client to leave the facility. Allowing clients to congregate sometimes creates problems. For any number of reasons, clients may not want to leave the food distribution site immediately after they have received their product. While congregating, it is not uncommon for clients to compare the food that they receive. This can cause problems for the social worker if all clients do not receive the exact same product(s). Questions may arise regarding client favoritism.

6. *Be consistent.* Unless your distribution is a "shop through", be consistent with what you give to all clients. Some food distribution programs allow clients to pick from items that have been made available for distribution, hence the term "shop through". This is done in an effort to eliminate food waste by clients who receive food and non-perishables that they do not want or can not use. If clients do not have that option and/or if food distributed is predetermined, then it is very important to ensure that all receive the same items. There will be times, however, when food and non-perishable items will need to be distributed according to the need of the client. For instance, families with infants may receive diapers and infant related products that are not given to those who do not have infants. Senior citizens and medically ill persons may be given food supplements such as Ensure. If this is sometimes done, be sure to explain this practice to all clients. This will also eliminate the appearance of favoritism.

7. *Respect the privacy of the client.* Do not subject clients to unnecessarily invasive questions regarding their personal belongings or interpersonal relationships. Remember, for most people, being in a position of needing food assistance is very humbling. Being subjected to questions about their private lives is both intrusive and unnecessary. For instance, it would be inappropriate for the social worker to ask a client questions about the reason for a divorce, the paternity of their children, or how much they pay for clothing. Yet, the authors have witnessed that members of vulnerable groups are sometimes subjected to such dehumanizing inquiries by helping professionals.

8. *Be considerate.* Consider the client's plight as if you were the recipient. Sometimes clients become upset about the quality and quantity of the food that they receive. Insist that agency personnel in charge of food product procurement choose quality items for distribution. Distribute food product as if you were in need of this service and were going to be the recipient. Some clients may be justified in their criticism of the hunger services that they receive and in the manner in which it is distributed to them.

The following is a checklist that the authors feel may be useful to help ensure that you have attended to the prescribed recommendations for treating clients fairly and ensuring that you have created a non-judgmental environment where they will feel welcome, supported and valued as an individual while receiving hunger service assistance.

Have you:

1. ____ Referred to the client by name while also using an icebreaker, such as asking them about their experience with getting to your agency, to make them feel welcome to receive services?
2. ____ Paid attention to your non-verbal behavior while you interacted with the client?
3. ____ Asked the client for their feedback about the quality of services that they receive from your agency?
4. ____ Applied the same rules and guidelines for receiving services to all clients?
5. ____ Maintained a business like environment and established a no loitering policy?
6. ____ Ensured that all clients receive the same food product unless otherwise indicated beforehand?
7. ____ Taken care to respect client privacy by not asking unnecessary personal questions?
8. ____ Distributed to type and quality of food that you would want to receive if you were the recipient?

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

People are not always capable of meeting their own basic human needs. There are millions of people in this society who chronically lack necessary food. This is most unfortunate considering that this country is one of the most prosperous in the world. In the modern world in which we live, life has been complicated by a number of factors. Many circumstances, both extraneous and internal to the individual, such as unemployment and underemployment, mental illness, sicknesses of various types, divorce, and homelessness cause people to be among those who seek assistance for relief of hunger. Life appears to be more stressful as people consider the threat and implications of nuclear war, the possibility of the solvency of the social security system, high divorce rates, and feelings of alienation and isolation that often accompany technological advances such as e-mail (Woodside & McClam, 1998). As a result, many people can no longer count on mutual aide and support from family and friends, as people are in constant flux and transition.

Two of the authors have first hand experiences in the food bank industry, one as a volunteer and the other as a paid professional. We have often witnessed clients behave in ways that at first glance indicated that they were not appreciative of the service(s) that they were receiving. Upon further investigation, we learned that there were a myriad of reasons for their behaviors. Being economically disadvantaged creates untold stress and strain that

perhaps only those who have experiences a lack of resources can truly understand. Often, the poor and disadvantaged are expected to be grateful for social welfare services regardless of the type that is being offered and the manner in which it is presented (Atkinson & Hackett, 2004). This is unfair and unreasonable to expect of them.

Social workers and others who provide hunger relief are doing much more than providing food to hungry people. They are often meeting self-esteem and ego needs of people, most of whom, if at all possible, would ordinarily rather not find themselves in this predicament. The authors hope that the readers of this article will have a better understanding of the issues that cause negative behaviors among some clients who have food insecurity. Having this understanding, along with employing a compassionate, kind, firm, and empathetic response to disgruntled people during service provision, may go a long way towards effectively addressing inappropriate behaviors among clients who receive hunger services.

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