

January 2019

## The Good, Bad and Ugly of Innovations in Human Services Administration: Evidence from New York Counties

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### Recommended Citation

Mullins, Lauren and Kasymova, Jyldyz (2019) "The Good, Bad and Ugly of Innovations in Human Services Administration: Evidence from New York Counties," *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy*. Vol. 25: No. 3, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalscholarship.tsu.edu/jpmmsp/vol25/iss3/4>

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## **Introduction**

Also known as the administrative arm of the government, counties are one of the most understudied levels of local government (Benton, 2002). The available research on counties is rather sparse, with existing studies being conceptual or quantitative. Recently, theoreticians have examined counties in numerous ways, including in relation to performance measures (Wang, 2002), e-government (Huang, 2006; Manoharan, 2013), privatization (Brown & Potoski, 2003; Van Slyke, 2003), politico-organizational structure (Benton, 2003; DeSantis & Renner, 1994), and service challenges (Benton, Byers, Cigler, Klase, Menzel, Salant, Streib, Svara, & Waugh, 2008), to highlight a few.

There are 3,069 counties in the U.S., and they vary greatly in size and population, as well as political dimensions. According to the 2007 Census of Governments, county governments receive just three percent of their overall revenue from the federal government. At the same time, 33 percent of their total revenue originates from their own home states, while over 60 percent of their budget revenue is generated from their own sources. In general, property taxes account for the largest source (40 percent) of self-generated funds (National Association of Counties, n.d.).

The traditionally performed state-mandated responsibilities of counties include property assessment, the maintenance of roads, the administration of elections, and the provision of social services. Among all these duties, providing health and human services is viewed as the key county responsibility (Kemp, 2008). In 2002, for example, counties spent

nearly a half of their resources on social services and education combined. According to the 2002 Census of Governments, counties spent almost \$33 billion on public welfare programs and in 2001 counties spent approximately 45 percent of their budgets on either social welfare or education.

The economic slowdown in the U.S. has increased the number of recipients of social services in numerous local governments (Wogan, 2013). According to the United States Department of Agriculture, over 23 million households across the U.S. participated in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) in 2013, which is significantly higher than the 15 million participants recorded in 2009 (USDA, 2014a). In New York State alone, over three million individuals, or over one million households, reported participating in SNAP in 2013, with the total cost of the program exceeding \$5 billion (USDA, 2014b). Many states were also motivated to encourage enrollment due to the multiplier effect of the supplemental programs. In 2008, a Moody's Analytics representative surmised that "increasing food stamp payments by \$1 boosted GDP by \$1.73" (Zandi, 2008), which was attractive for states experiencing economic difficulties to participate in the economic supplemental nutritional assistance program. Both the pressure from states and the growing demand for services forced counties to initiate innovative ways of delivering welfare services, especially human and healthcare services. A new form of administration, known as a "task-based" (or process-based) approach in administering social services was introduced in several jurisdictions. According to the task-based approach, all cases are separated into different segments, with staff handling specific tasks within a case. This differs from the previous approach, in which a single

person handled all aspects of a case. In other words, different workers manage different cases at different stages of the application process (Walters, 2011). (See Table 1 for a breakdown of the differences between the two models). The task-based approach is believed to give managers the flexibility to adjust the workloads of caseworkers for particular stages of the application process (Wogan, 2013). It also ensures that clients have better access to available caseworkers, as there is no longer the need for a single caseworker to be assigned to a specific case. Furthermore, in many instances, task-based administration emphasizes eliminating face-to-face interview requirements in favour of using technology, as well as the segmentation of an individual application into several steps with either the front-line workers or call centres in charge. In sum, “task-based” administration eliminates the dominating role of a single caseworker in managing individual cases, and to a certain extent, the burden for organizing the work shifts from all of the line staff to a few supervisors/managers (New York Public Welfare Association (NYPWA) Conference, 2010).

**Table 1: Differences between case management and task-based management**

<b>Case Management</b>	<b>Task-Based (Process) Management</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Historical way of doing business in human services</li> <li>✓ Workers are trained holistically how to manage the caseload and provide program support</li> <li>✓ Worker has an assigned caseload</li> <li>✓ Worker acts as a guide for the individuals in the case to get them through a particular system to receive benefits and/or meet predetermined</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Historical way of doing business in the private sector</li> <li>✓ Workers are trained in-depth in key processes, but have a holistic sense of the big picture. Worker strengths in certain processes are noted and used to get the job done</li> <li>✓ The job (caseload) is owned by the team</li> <li>✓ The task at hand is the driver/guide.</li> </ul>

<p>goals ensuring positive customer service</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Staff satisfaction is reliant on customer compliance/caseload status</li> <li>✓ The delivery of services is based on a worker providing an assessment and then arranging, referring, coordinating, monitoring, and evaluating the delivery of services to meet the needs of the individuals and families assigned</li> <li>✓ Specialized and unique services are delivered based on the case circumstances</li> <li>✓ Normally the customer is involved in the decision-making regarding how a case is to proceed</li> <li>✓ Each case is individualized for worker and customer</li> <li>✓ Worker success is based on the overall status of caseload and customer outcomes</li> </ul>	<p>Work is broken down into specific processes and prioritized in a manner to provide optimum efficiency and ensuring positive customer service</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Staff satisfaction is reliant on the timeliness of task processing</li> <li>✓ The delivery of services is based on the breakdown of specified tasks that are prioritized to meet the needs of individuals and families assigned</li> <li>✓ Specialized and unique services are delivered based on the priority of the case circumstances</li> <li>✓ Customer involvement in the decision-making process is minimal</li> <li>✓ It is the priority and placement of the task in the process that drives the decision-making of how a case is to proceed</li> <li>✓ Processes are individualized</li> <li>✓ Worker success is based on meeting daily set standards</li> </ul>
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*Source:* adopted from NYWPA Conference, 2011

The existing literature presents contradictory findings with respect to new methods of administering welfare services. In 2008, for example, Jeffrey Wenger and Vicky Wilkins (2008) examined the use of telephone claims for unemployment insurance in the U.S. and found that automation decreased the discretion exercised by claim administrators. At the same time many studies stressed the importance of the individual interaction between front-line workers and the recipients of services (Lipsky, 2010; Rosenthal & Peccei, 2006). Examining the clients' perception of the effectiveness of a modernized service delivery, Colleen Heflin, Andrew London, and Peter Mueser (2013) found several problems with online applications for SNAP services, most of which relate to the digital divide (Lenhart, Horrigan, Rainie, Allen, Boyce, Madden, & O'Grady, 2003), which

primarily implies a limited use of internet among those who use social services more often (low-income, less-educated, and older individuals).

Modernizing the provision of health and human services takes different forms and is broadly defined among states (Selden, 2002). In general, it relates to reorganizing administrative functions, expanding the use of technology, and policy simplification, to highlight a few. In 2004, for example, Florida's Department of Children and Families introduced the Automated Community Connections to Economic Self-Sufficiency (ACCESS), a technological innovation to provide SNAP, cash assistance, and Medicaid programs (Hulsey et al., 2013). The implementation of ACCESS Florida was based on numerous organizational reforms, as well as the extensive use of technology in delivering services.

This article presents a case study of modernization efforts in selected counties in New York State with respect to social and human services. The only current academic research on this topic is the study by Heflin et al. (2013), which focused on the experience of welfare clients with the implementation of electronic services in Florida. In contrast to Heflin et al. (2013), this study examined administrators' perceptions of the process of modernizing social services at county levels of governments. Examining the perceptions of county administrators complements previous studies and provides a better understanding of the challenges of improving services at county levels.

The article proceeds in the following format. First, a literature analysis of studies on

welfare administration in the U.S is presented. Second, an overview of welfare services in the state of New York is provided. Third, the study methods are discussed. Fourth, specific county cases and findings are presented. This is followed by the conclusion.

### **Literature review**

The macro-economic slowdown had a significant impact on the socio-economic conditions of local jurisdictions. In 2009, the *New York Times* published an article revealing that an increasing number of people were receiving SNAP benefits. Within the state of New York, the increase in enrollment was reported to be 35 percent higher than 2007. The average enrollment across New York State counties was reported as 10 percent.

In 2006, Sheila Zedlewski, Gina Adams, Lisa Dubay, and Genevieve Kenney (2006) conducted an analysis of the use of SNAP, Medicaid, and childcare subsidies. They found that only about five percent of low-income working families received all three welfare subsidies, although many were eligible to receive all three. Dottie Rosenbound and Stacy Dean (2011) arrived at a similar conclusion several years later.

Technology is often being used to improve the efficiency of service provisions and to extend applicable services to a wider category of the population. But it was also found to be effective in eliminating possible discretion exercised by front-line workers. In 2008, for example, Wenger and Wilkins (2008) studied the automation of unemployment claims. Using state-level panel data from 1992 to 2005, they found that telephone claims

filing had increased the number of women receiving unemployment benefits. The authors suggested that this was due to the fact that, compared to an individual face-to-face application process, the telephone application eliminated discrimination against women who were filing unemployment claims.

The Connecticut Department of Social Services started implementing a task-based approach in 2013. Connecticut had a long history of mediocre performance in administering welfare services. The reform began with the Hartford office and expanded across the area. The effectiveness was already evident ninety days after implementation, and the percentage of emergency applications for food stamps completed on time rose from 64 percent to 77 percent within a year (Wogan, 2013).

Florida is one of the first states to modernize its welfare delivery system. In 2003, the governor and legislature began investigating outsourcing models of social services due to the existing inefficiencies in social services. At that time the Florida Department of Children and Families proposed an alternative option that was based on the extensive use of technology, including creating a toll-free number with an Automated Response Unit to handle routine inquiries (Table 2), without any need for face-to-face meetings with clients. Known as Automated Community Connections to Economic Self-Sufficiency (ACCESS), the new business model was used to deliver Medicaid, temporary cash assistance, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Lange, 2009).



**Table 2: Summary application procedure changes**

<b>Application Activity</b>	<b>Before ACCESS Florida</b>	<b>ACCESS Florida</b>
Mode	Paper application	Electronic application
Location	DCF Customer Service Center	A computer with internet access
Eligibility Interviews	Full one-hour interview for all; eligibility interview by phone uncommon	One 15-minute (or shorter) interview for most; a second, 45-minute interview for some; eligibility interviews by phone are common
Documentation	Most expenses, assets, and income require documentation; must submit documentation in person to DCF worker	Most expenses and assets, and some income do not require documentation; self-service submission either in person or by fax

*Source:* Cody et al, 2008

The system was simplified through several steps. First of all, eligibility for multiple programs was processed through an online application, eliminating unnecessary travels and meetings with individual caseworkers. When necessary, applicants could participate in interviews by telephone (Heflin et al., 2013). The program resulted in a 43 percent reduction in staff, even as caseloads were recorded to be increase from 2002 to 2005 (Heflin et al., 2013).

California is another state that stood at the forefront of welfare services administration reforms. Between September 2007 and September 2008, public assistance programs across California experienced increases in requests for monthly cash assistance for families, emergency assistance for homeless families, SNAP services, and other welfare services. In the environment of increasing demand for public assistance and inadequate staffing, several counties began modernizing the delivery of services. Waiving face-to-

face interviews, creating call centers, and arranging out-stations and units according to specific tasks were some of the first steps taken in several counties (Williams, 2010). This task-based approach resulted in a significant decrease in application-processing delays. Commentators also noted improved quality in application processing, as more workers had access to each case (Williams, 2010).

What does the current administration of social services look like in New York State?

With a population of close to 20 million, New York is one of the few states known for being progressive in providing welfare services to the disadvantaged (Van Slyke, 2003). Until recently, most social services, especially those related to public benefits, were administered by caseworkers in individual counties. Two events have impacted a recent transformation in social services administration: the 2008 global recession and the adoption of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Specifically, the passage of the ACA has been leading to a centralized state-level administration of Medicaid.

#### Social services in New York State

The state of New York has participated in the expansion of Medicaid since the adoption of the ACA. States that participate in the ACA expansion must provide Medicaid coverage to all state residents below a certain income level. The benefit for participating in the expansion is particularly high for those states that already provide broad eligibility coverage (Holahan, Buettgens, Carroll, & Dorn, 2012). This is due to the fact that the federal government reimburses costs associated with Medicaid coverage, at least in the first several years. As a result of this incentive, the state of New York created an online

application for residents of the state and began taking over the responsibilities of managing Medicaid, which were previously the direct responsibility of counties. But some counties are still retaining certain functions for Medicaid administration, including processing applications and renewals for individuals who are aged, blind, or disabled and conducting chronic care (nursing home) and alternate-levels-of-care eligibility (New York State Department of Health, 2012). As of April 2010, about 4.8 million New Yorkers received coverage through Medicaid (United Hospital Fund, 2010).

New York State consists of 57 counties, excluding New York City counties, each with diverse populations and economic conditions. Altogether, New York State's counties operate under the<sup>[1]</sup>~~SEP~~ general provisions of the county law, although there are "charter counties," which are given greater home-rule power.

In 2009, an average of 15.2 million households in the U.S. received SNAP services. The program provides assistance to low-income individuals and households in purchasing eligible food items for home consumption (United States Department of Agriculture, 2010). New York State reported almost 3 million average monthly participants in 2011 (United States Department of Agriculture, 2012). In comparison to Medicaid, many counties continue administering SNAP services locally.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which primarily provides cash assistance to poor families with children, is another service administered at county levels. In March 2013, 158,864 families in New York State participated in the TANF program

(Falk, 2013; Schott, 2012). Temporary assistance requires a face-to-face application procedure and is managed at the county level.

Another social safety net service provided in New York State is the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), which helps households that pay a high proportion of household income for energy during the late fall and winter months, and includes a cooling assistance component as well.<sup>1</sup> Applications for benefits related to HEAP are managed at county levels. In 2012, more than 1.4 million households received HEAP benefits in New York State (Montgomery, 2013). Other services provided by counties include child and adult services care.

This article attempts to identify social safety services that are being reformed at county levels in New York State. Specifically, it attempts to respond to the following questions. First, what types of innovations are taking place, and in which social safety net programs? Second, how differently are social safety net programs being managed as a result of these reforms, and what are the consequences? To do this, the experiences of six selected counties are examined primarily using interviews with responsible administrators at county levels. The findings of this research have important implications concerning the issue of accessibility to services, as well as understanding the origins of innovation at county levels, a jurisdictional level that remains understudied in public administration literature.

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<sup>1</sup> please refer to <http://otda.ny.gov/programs/heap>

## **Methods**

The study features six different counties that reported implementing innovations in the administration of social services. In selecting the cases, a theoretical rather than statistical sampling strategy was used (Eisenhardt, 1989). Each case was chosen to illustrate different types of reforms and rearrangements taking place. The focus is on emphasizing reforms and innovations with different origins and activities.

Purposeful sampling was utilized to select information-rich cases (Patton, 1990). In five of the case studies—Erie, Monroe, Genesee, Tioga, and Broome counties—informal face-to-face interviews were held with the key actors, who also shared internal documents. The remaining case, Schenectady, was built on a document analysis, state of the county address, correspondence, and the evaluation of the legislature and existing literature. Interviews were collected from April 2014 to September 2014. Each interview lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to one hour, and all interviews were conducted over the phone. A copy of the interview questionnaire is attached in Appendix 1.

## **Comparative case studies**

### **Monroe County**

With a population of close to 800,000, Monroe County is known for a high poverty level among its residents. In 2013, Rochester, the largest city in the county, became the fifth poorest city in the U.S. An anonymous interview with a county representative at the managerial level was held in May 2014 to learn about innovation practices in the county's Department of Human Services (DHS), which processes Medicaid, SNAP, and

temporary assistance applications. In 2012, it processed an average of 4,400 temporary assistance applications per month and 3,100 Medicaid applications per month, while its active caseload for SNAP averaged over 58,000 cases (Monroe County Department of Human Services, 2012). Monroe, as many other counties in New York, has moved toward a task-based administration of welfare programs, instead of the case-based approach. But among all social services, only SNAP is being managed through a task-based approach.

In summer 2013, the DHS implemented a Centralized Document Management (CDM) system. The system primarily entails having all incoming clients' documents in one centralized electronic system. The system was designed to reduce unnecessary case-processing time. The state of New York provided some assistance with technology. According to Interviewee M, with the new approach, any incoming document or application for services such as SNAP is scanned into the web-based system and is "tasked" electronically to a team or a worker within the DHS. The system has generally increased the efficiency of the department. In comparison to modernization in other states, Florida for example, Monroe continues to accept hard copies of clients' applications. In sum, although SNAP is being processed online through the web-based system eliminating face-to-face interaction with clients, residents of Monroe have the option of using the online SNAP program or submitting a hard copy of the application. The interviewee noted that some workers initially expressed resistance toward the change, but that the effectiveness of the new system abated their discontent.

## Erie County

With a population of close to a million, Erie County is one of the largest and poorest counties in New York State. Based on its 1960 charter, Erie County established a strong elected county executive system, with a legislative branch serving as a county legislature. The elected county executive enjoys a wide range of responsibilities, including supervising and directing the internal organization of every department, fiscal and financial decision-making, and appointing individual department heads, just to highlight a few (New York State Association of Counties, 2009). This study focuses on the child adoption unit in the Department of Social Services, one of over 20 departments within Erie County.

An interview with an anonymous caseworker within the child adoption unit was conducted on May 8, 2014. In total, 12 caseworkers and several other support personnel currently work in the unit. On average, an individual caseworker is in charge of 20 cases. Each individual works with a single case for at least three years. The interviewee discussed how the adoption unit implemented the team-based process in 2011 as a pilot project.

There were several reasons driving the adoption unit's implementation of the team-based approach, including the view that "the traditional approaches to child welfare casework often resulted in extreme stress and left caseworkers with a feeling of isolation and lack of support" (New York State Child Welfare/Child Protective Services Training Institute, 2011, p. 2). It was believed that the team approach would alleviate the stress of the single

ownership of casework and decision-making and would promote an environment of complementary skills. In the team-based approach, each caseworker was expected to identify the “so-called” difficult cases that he/she was in charge of. The difficult cases were brought to a special meeting where all caseworkers reviewed them and discussed potential solutions.

Implementing a team-based approach required special training, including “communication within a team, building a rapport, respecting differences.”. The interviewee also noted that all caseworkers supported the new approach in general and found it to be “effective and useful,” and that a team-based approach eliminated “discretion” and “personal judgment” in deciding difficult cases. The team-based approach was beneficial not only for new personnel but also for seasoned caseworkers. The project was discontinued in 2011, although there was a clear expression of support for the team-based approach among caseworkers.

### Tioga County

With a population of 51,125, Tioga County is a rural county in New York State. In October 2010, Tioga’s social services department initiated the implementation of a task-based management approach for SNAP and Medicaid applications. The anonymous interview with a county representative was conducted on May 28, 2014. According to the interviewee, the transition toward a task-based approach from a case-based approach was caused by the unexpected increase in applications for benefits following the 2008 recession. Consequently, Tioga County implemented an e-filing application for Medicaid



and for most of its food stamp applications. The interviewee noted that the new practice received wide support among workers and did not have any specific disadvantages.

According to the 2013 annual county address, Tioga completed its first full year using the task-based model for providing food stamps and Medicaid services. Within 2011–2012, it completed 20,874 tasks, using 26,650 telephone calls (Tioga County Legislature, 2012). The interviewee pointed out the difficulty of implementing a task-based approach in so-called “intensive case” services, such as child services and cash assistance, and said the use of technology and a task-based approach may be applicable for so-called “cut and dry” service areas, such as SNAP and Medicaid. Tioga began expanding the task-based approach in providing HEAP services in 2014. When asked why all counties were not implementing the task-based approach, the interviewee noted that counties with caseworkers with longer tenure might dislike the change. It was also noted that the county size mattered, for example, “larger counties are difficult to modernize immediately.”

#### Schenectady County

Schenectady is one of the first pilot counties that attempted to use the task-based approach in SNAP and Medicaid. In 2004, the county started using it for delivering Medicaid services and, with the support of the state of New York, expanded it to SNAP applications processing. Although, the county currently utilizes web-based applications for both services, it cooperates with community-based organizations to administer applications for both programs. Accordingly, applications for benefits can be submitted

not only at the Schenectady County Department of Social Services, but also through several community-based organizations that provide clients assistance with SNAP application procedures.

In 2013, Schenectady completed its transition to the task-based processing of SNAP applications (Schenectady County, 2013). Several factors influenced the decision to use a task-based approach in SNAP services. These include, but are not limited to, a high caseload-to-work ratio, a backlog in processing new applications, recipients' complaints, and staff stress (Schenectady County, 2011).

Schenectady faced several challenges in advancing a task-based management practice, including preparing daily work assignments for each worker, tracking the progress of applications, and assigning tasks based on each workers' individual strengths and efficiency (Schenectady County, 2011).

### Genesee County

Genesee is a rural county in western New York with a population of 59,454. The County includes 13 towns, six villages, and the City of Batavia, which is the county seat. Two representatives of the county at the managerial levels were interviewed, on May 21, 2014, and May 22, 2014, regarding the recent reforms in the county's department of human and social services. In early 2014, Genesee started advancing a task-based approach to delivering social services. Prior to that, the county conducted several meetings with other counties, such as Tioga County, to learn about the task-based approach and how to adopt

it in Genesee. In addition, Genesee decided to manage SNAP and Medicaid applications through a web-based system, although hard copies of applications for SNAP benefits continue to be administered by the county. The interviews revealed that the county expected both positive and negative results from the innovation.

There are good things about it and there are some bad things about it. The good thing is that you are also able to hand in the work as required. Supervisors have a better control level to distribute work, which is really a good thing. (Interviewee G)

There are some disadvantages related to the loss of case-based management. Traditionally, caseworkers tended to know assigned cases in details, which led to low error rates in administering cases. A good understanding of individual cases is impossible to retain when benefit applications are managed according to specific tasks by different caseworkers.

Our workers tended to know their clients very well when [a] case-based approach was used. After a while, they knew all nuances, where they [clients] needed extra assistance to get documentations. I think you lose some of that attribution in the task-based approach.

Another potential problem with task-based management relates to the loss of continuity for fraud detection.

... Because I might pick up your documentation two weeks ago, and somebody else may pick it up when it comes in, and somebody different two weeks later might get it. So, they might not be able to put all relevant pieces together. Whereas, when you

manage the entire case individually, you can sense that something doesn't smell right, or something doesn't fit because you looked at it before.

In sum, a case-based approach appeared to have advantages that were impossible to retain in the task-based administration. Although a task-based approach seemed to be more effective overall, an interviewee in Genesee County stressed several challenges that prevented many counties in New York State from advancing to a task-based approach. These include a specific political climate in a given county, which forces a county to maintain the old manner of administering social services. Second, counties with a larger number of caseworkers and a strong union membership disliked and resisted change.

#### Broome County

Broome County is one of the few jurisdictions that decided to use technology to administer its SNAP services. With a population of close to 200,000, Broome has over 12 percent of its population living below the poverty line. In 2014, the county reported to over 16,000 SNAP caseloads managed by 19 examiners. On average, it receives 600 new SNAP applications per month.

In 2014, the county procured a process and technology improvement grant from the USDA. It was used to support the implementation of an electronic task-based approach in SNAP services and the creation of a call centre (Broome County Department of Social Services, 2012).

The call centre was established to streamline application-related questions using the motto “one call, one resolution.” Furthermore, call agents were authorized “to make simple case changes while on the phone, document the telephone call, refer the call to other Examiners or Supervisors (for more extensive work/interviews) and provide follow-up requirements to the caller” (Broom County, 2014). The call centre eliminated the requirement for face-to-face interviews, which traditionally took numerous hours. The county designated a keyboard specialist with the role of entering data into the web-based program, as well as scan documents and applications upon receipt.

According to Interviewee B, the implementation of the call centre and the web-based data inputs demonstrated that workers were able to process work more efficiently. Timeliness of the application processing and the decreasing number of clients’ complaints were two important indicators to measure the effectiveness of the new system.

In general, informal interviews conducted with county representatives revealed that the use of technology in modernizing services became necessary as many counties continued to face staff shortages and increasing workloads. Furthermore, the traditional case-based approach caused many delays and increased customer dissatisfaction, specifically in Broome. In Broome, one of the key challenges of using the new approach was the cost of the software program and the time required to retrain workers.

## **Analysis and conclusion**

Counties remain an understudied level of local government due to their limited accessibility for researchers. At the same time, the menu of county functions is both growing and changing. With a long history of providing welfare services, counties have been under continuous criticism, especially in relation to the lack of innovation and modernization. In this study, the experiences of several counties in New York State were evaluated in order to understand the origins, consequences, and challenges of the modernization of social services. Almost all of the counties examined faced an increasing workload as a result of the 2008 recession. The increasing demand for social safety net programs incentivized counties to operate differently, including utilizing technology. “Do it or die” is a common idea that was reiterated in several interviews in relation to the need for technology in serving the population. The key innovations in departments of social services related to transitioning from the case-based administration of welfare application to a task-based approach (see Table 3). Most interviewees noted the numerous advantages of task-based administration, with the most important being effectiveness and efficiency in delegating tasks to workers and examiners, rather than complete cases. Use of the web-based application for welfare services was another element of the modernization of social services.

**Table 3: Analysis of six cases**

	<b>Broome</b>	<b>Erie</b>	<b>Genesee</b>	<b>Monroe</b>	<b>Schenectady</b>	<b>Tioga</b>
Population	197,534 *	919,866*	59,454*	749,606*	155,333*	50,243*
Population below poverty line (%)	16.5	14.2	11.8	14.6	12	8.8

Services innovated	SNAP	Child Adoption Unit	SNAP	SNAP	SNAP	SNAP
Innovation	Call centre, online technology, task-based approach	Team-based approach in child services	Online technology, task-based approach	Online technology, call centre, task-based approach	Online technology, task-based approach	Online technology, task-based approach
Technology	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
How did they learn about this new approach?	From other counties	Pilot project	Other counties	Conferences, other counties	State-driven pilot county	Other counties
Challenges in doing things differently	Retraining workers, cost of the software program	Unclear, although workers reported to support the innovative approach	Union, resistance of workers	Retraining workers	Retraining workers	Caseworkers with a longer tenure may dislike changes
Other details	None	None	Use of community based organizations in facilitating online applications	None	None	None

\*US Census<sup>2</sup>

Although, there are concerns about the limited ability of the untrained population to utilize web-based applications, counties were able to address this in several ways. First, they continued working with both online and hard copies of welfare applications. Second, community-based organizations were involved to help clients who required assistance with the online application for social services.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36/36107.html>

These six cases demonstrated that counties learn from each other about innovations. They also showed that counties tailor specific administrative innovations to local conditions, taking into account things such as a different level of hierarchy within a county, the number of examiners, the number of clients, and the size of the county. It also appears that using technology is necessary in all counties, as most of them continue facing shortages in staff and an increasing demand for social welfare programs, especially in the poorest jurisdictions.

Although the innovative approach has some shortcomings, counties will continue to be under fiscal pressure and traditional administration formats will need to be adjusted. At the same time, given such a brief history of using these practices, we cannot assert with confidence that new ways of doing things are effective. At the same time, given that counties have such a brief history of using these practices, it is not yet clear if they are effective. Additional time is required to evaluate not only the efficiency of processing applications, but also to analyze the error rate and fraud incidence. Furthermore, a survey of social workers is required to obtain a better understanding of the impact of new ways of managing services within social services departments.

Counties are important levels of local jurisdictions as they provide services to the largest portion of vulnerable populations. This study demonstrated that counties do innovate, especially during times of fiscal difficulty and often with the help of state-level government. It shows that both rural and urban counties of various sizes tend to embrace the changes. In 2002, J. Edwin Benton (2012) pointed out that the modernization of



county government could be both the result of the growth of county services or a “by-product of the growth” (p. 12). In this respect, it is expected that counties with a broad repertoire of services may be at the forefront of the modernization of their governmental structure and operation.

As any other study, this study has its limitation. First, it examined a small number of the 57 counties in New York State. Therefore, the findings may have a limited generalizability. Furthermore, in-depth interviews were used as the main source of data for all counties, but the degree of using interviews or existing document analysis varied across the six cases. Second, the study focused on the perceptions of managerial-level administrators. A future study could address this shortcoming by surveying front-line caseworkers, similar to the studies conducted by Dennis Daley, Michael Vasu, and Meredith Blackwell Weinstein (2002) and Joe Soss (1999). Finally, in the manner of Heflin and colleagues (2012), another study should be conducted across counties in New York with a focus on clients and their perceptions of modernization in social services.

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## **Definitions**

Case-based administration: The management and implementation of social services based on individual cases.

Counties: One of several local government levels that exist in some countries, including in the U.S.

Human services: A range of social services provided by counties or other local jurisdictions.

Local administration: The day-to-day activity of a local level of government.

Reforms: A set of innovations in managing organizations.

Task-based administration: The management and implementation of social services based on specific tasks.

Technology: The application of scientific knowledge and tools for practical purposes.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Interview questions**

1. In your opinion, what are several key challenges to administer social services in your county?
2. Is your county using an online application process for social services? Please explain.
3. What are some benefits/drawbacks in promoting it?
4. In your opinion, what would be several (2–3) innovative methods of providing social services in New York State?
5. In your opinion, would innovations be common for counties with a larger number of low-income households?
6. What are some key challenges in advancing innovations in counties?
7. Have you heard about the so-called task-based approach? Please explain.



- a. Probe: Please tell me about the history of this management style?
- 8. Is it applicable for your county?
- 9. Please describe advantages/disadvantages of this management style.
- 10. In your opinion, what is the role of the state in promoting innovations in counties?
- 11. How do you see the administration of social services in 5–10 years in your county?