

WHEN POLITICS AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COLLIDE: THE IMPACT ON HUMAN SERVICE DELIVERY

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This study examines the problems facing human service organizations resulting from the failure of the State of Illinois to provide funding for basic human services during the 2015–17 budget impasse. Drawing upon 31 interviews with 501(c)(3) human service organizations dependent on government funds, the analysis shows how political battles hindered social services, as finite nonprofit resources were refocused on organizational survival. The authors demonstrate how the impasse widened the politics–public administration dichotomy, hindered growth and innovation, and burdened organizations with sizable rebuilding costs. The research concludes by offering recommendations to mitigate these problems in the future.

During the 2015–2017 legislative sessions, the State of Illinois failed to pass a budget. Partisan politics turned the state’s budget into a battlefield in which each side sought to gain maximum leverage, resulting in the halting of funds to previously approved policies. These policies were designed to deliver basic, but crucial, human services that allow their communities to function, such as support for developmental disabilities, domestic violence victims, and child welfare.

As a result of the shifting roles of government over the last several decades, public administrators often rely on community organizations to deliver human services. Frequently, this symbiotic relationship results in community organizations becoming fiscally dependent on the public dollars they receive. During the 2015–2017 budget impasse, politics immobilized the state’s funding mechanisms. The state did not pay many community organizations for contracted services. Despite the lack of payment, the organizations were still required to provide services to fulfill their contractual obligations.

The separation of politics and public administration is a foundational concept in the public sector. Dating back to Woodrow Wilson, scholars and practitioners alike called for separation between the policymaking process and the policy implementation process (Wilson, 1887). Agenda setting, policy formation, and policy adoption are stages in the policymaking process that occur separately from policy implementation (Birkland, 2015). Thus, the politics–public administration dichotomy should, in theory, remain intact. Yet, in the case of the State of Illinois budget impasse, actors on the political side of the dichotomy leveraged their role in the policymaking process to achieve better outcomes for their partisan politics. The passage of the state budget and the ability to implement previously approved policies that improve constituents’ lives became a pivotal and partisan point of influence. With the knowledge we have on the politics–public administration dichotomy, we asked: How and why did such a paramount failure occur? To help provide answers, we examine these questions in the context of the budget impasse through the lens of the stages of the policy process (Birkland, 2015).

TABLE 1
PRE-IMPASSE DIRECT SERVICE ORGANIZATION CHARACTERISTICS

	MEAN	MEDIAN	RANGE
Number of Employees	256	111	15–1354
Number of Volunteers	222	225	0–525
Age of Organization	40	38	24–81
Total Expenses	\$8,745,856	\$3,082,333	\$474,200–\$64,209,510

N = 22; Data collected from 2014 IRS Form 990s

The methodology used to examine these questions centered on semistructured long-form interviews with leaders from 31 501(c)(3) human service organizations across Illinois (Figure 1). Interviewees came from nine statewide associations (representing 1,100+ human service organizations) and 22 large and small direct human service nonprofit organizations (NPOs). The 31 organizations were dependent on public dollars from the state and the federal government (Table 1). Interview data is supplemented with secondary data

sources, including financial information from IRS Form 990s and news articles, to achieve triangulation. Figure 2 presents the reach and interconnectedness of the nine membership associations participating in the study. This figure shows a series of linkages between two prominent capacity-building organizations and dozens of single-purpose organizations, such as those devoted to youth, seniors, and residents with addiction problems.

FIGURE 1
GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

(9 Statewide Associations, 12 Large Direct Service NPOs, 10 Small Direct Service Organizations)

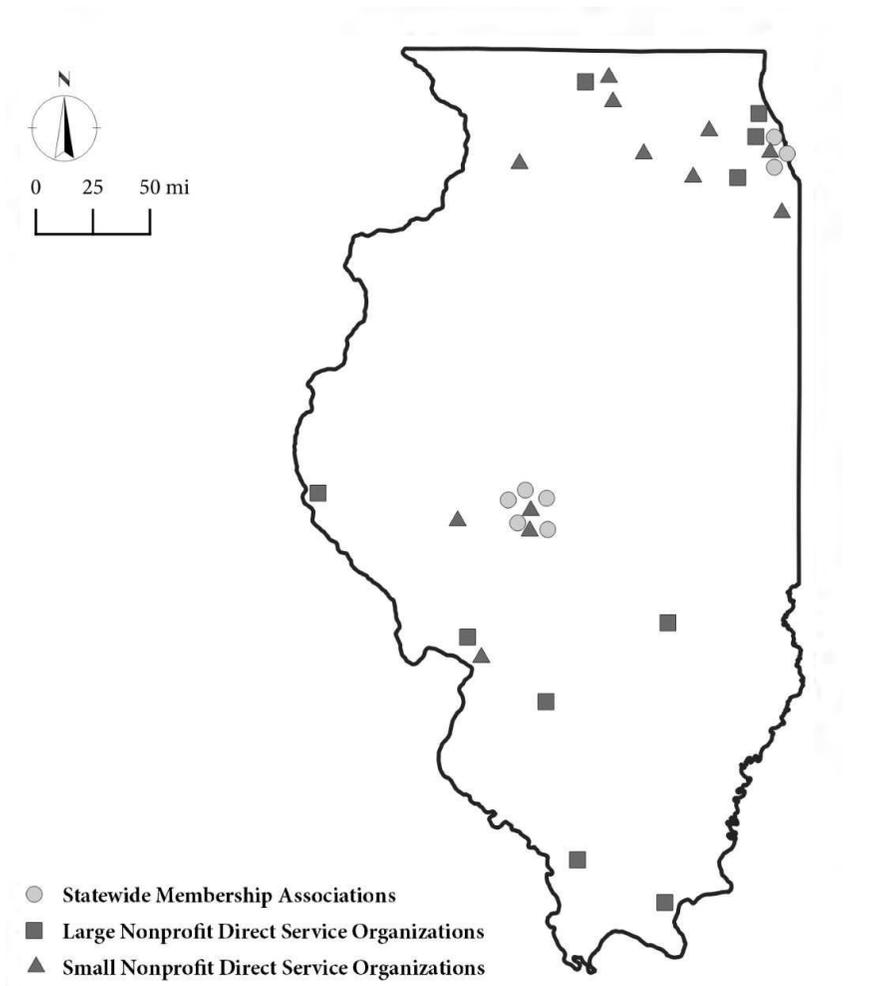
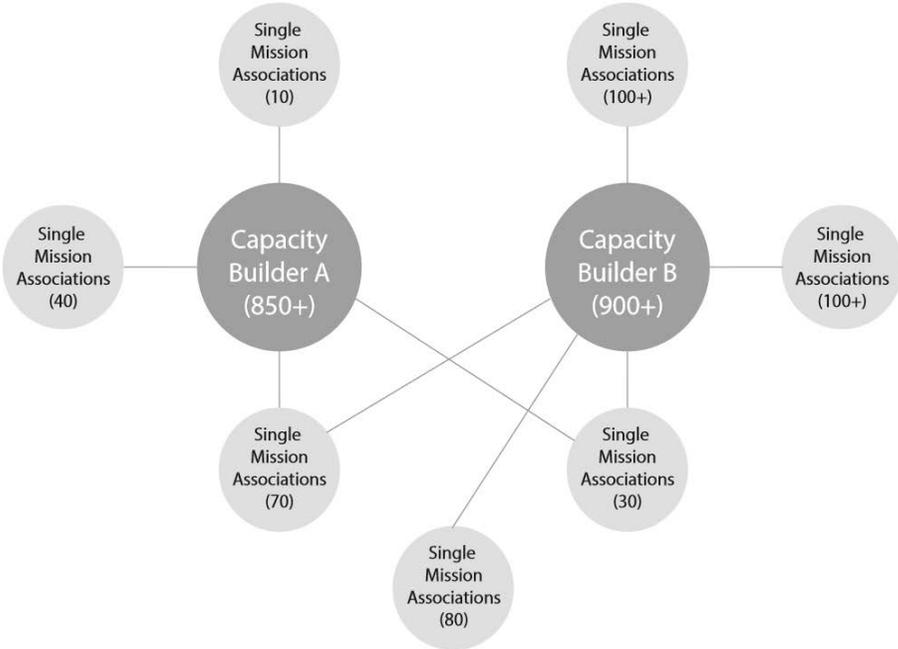


FIGURE 2

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STATEWIDE MEMBERSHIP ASSOCIATIONS PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY AND THEIR MEMBERSHIP SIZE



The two larger circles are multi-mission or capacity-building coalitions, and the smaller circles are single-mission coalitions of service providers. The numbers in parentheses indicate each coalition's approximate membership.

We engaged in a qualitative grounded analytic approach, a systematic inductive method that uses directed open-ended analysis allowing empirical data to drive the findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), to explore the interdependent relationship between politics and public administration and its resulting implications on public services. We organized our findings into four sections. The first section provides a historical narrative of the relationship between the state, human service providers, and the budget process. The second section examines *how* politics affects public services. The third section assesses *what* the impacts of politics are on public services. The fourth section evaluates *why* politics affects public service. We conclude with recommendations on how the situation can be avoided or managed in the future.

TENSIONS FACING THE HUMAN SERVICES SECTOR DURING THE IMPASSE

The polarized Illinois General Assembly and then Governor Bruce Rauner failed to agree upon and pass a budget in spring 2015. An emergency stopgap budget was approved for essential services only. Not all human services were considered essential, and many human service organizations went unfunded as a result. The situation left many organizations that had executed contracts to deliver human services locally with no mechanism to receive payments for services already rendered.

Public entities rely on contracted agencies to implement policy (Corrigan, 2013; Salamon, 1995). The state's inability to distribute payment for services left the organizations with few options but to take drastic, uncharted measures to keep their doors open. The NPOs, which remained responsible for implementing public policy, were forced to tap into reserves, reduce staffing and services, undergo mergers, and use board and executive personal assets to support cash flow. For example, only seven months into the budget impasse, the state owed Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI), the largest statewide social services provider in Illinois, over \$6 million.¹ After months of relying on additional community resources, foundation support, and bank lines of credit, LSSI was forced to restructure in an attempt to survive. Only seven months into the impasse, LSSI cut 30 programs (including residential rehabilitation for drug and alcohol treatment, community-based counseling, youth emergency shelters, and reentry services for former prisoners), eliminated 43% of its staff (over 750 positions), and slashed services to over 4,700 individuals in the communities it served (LSSI, 2016). Some organizations were eventually forced to close their doors.

In spring 2016, the Illinois General Assembly failed again to pass a budget. A second emergency stopgap budget was authorized. This time, essential services were redefined, and different organizations were included in the new definition. During the second year of the impasse, the human service associations previously involved in the stopgap learned that the process had dramatically changed and that some NPOs would no longer be included in stopgap funding. For example, community-based health programs and HIV testing were now affected; the number of new HIV cases reported plunged by 50%, but experts attributed this to the lack of testing and not to a reduction in prevalence of the disease (Eldeib, 2016).

The 2017 legislative session ended in yet another impasse. Yet again, partisan politics dominated the policymaking process. State agencies threatened to close as of July 1 (Bookwalter, 2017). Crediting agencies threatened to move the state's credit rating to junk status ("Illinois debt," 2017). Higher education bodies threatened not to reaccredit the state's colleges and universities (Seltzer, 2017), and 69% of agencies received partial or no payment for the services they performed in FY 2017, leading to program closures (25%) and fewer individuals served (46%; United Way of Illinois, 2017). The policy process incapacitated organizations' ability to deliver services. Specifically, the need for budget approval, also known as the policy adoption step, held up critical funding needed for the organizations to deliver services. The legislature held special sessions, and legislators finally reached an agreement at the beginning of the 2017–2018 fiscal year. The state began reimbursing NPOs in September 2017 for the dollars overdue for the previous fiscal year. To date, many of the NPOs included in this study have yet to receive any reimbursements from the first two years of the three-year impasse.

WITHHOLDING PUBLIC SERVICE FUNDING TO GAIN POLITICAL LEVERAGE

There are five interdependent and often sequential stages to the policy process (Birkland, 2015; Jones, 1970). At the state level of government, political actors dominate the first three stages: agenda setting, formulation, and adoption. Public servants, the government administrators, and organizations providing services on behalf of the state administer the final two stages of policy implementation and evaluation. Theoretically, the adoption stage is where the political side of the dichotomy should end and public administration should begin.

However, the approval of a state budget is one product of the adoption stage. The approved budget generates the resources necessary for policy implementation to occur. Budget approval links the stages of adoption and implementation and, thus, also links politics and public administration. A leader of a statewide membership association expressed frustration in this relationship. This anonymous respondent stated, "What we do is not political; it gets caught up in politics." The political side of the process can withhold budget approval, turning the budget into a fulcrum upon which policy implementation rests. As a product of the adoption stage, budget approval becomes a critical point of control for polarized parties pushing partisan agendas.

“I think it’s been argued by Democrats and Republicans that the impasse has been used as a leverage to secure non-budgetary [issues]. The impasse was used as a strategy by the Governor to secure changes of workers’ compensation reforms and pension reform. I’m still surprised it happened. Nobody likes to be used as that kind of leverage.”

~Respondent A9

The implementation stage is where public services are produced. Without an approved budget, state funds cannot be appropriated and allocated. The state cannot fulfill its contractual obligations to pay NPOs for their services. When this occurs, politics shifts the fulcrum, creating an imbalance in the dichotomy and controlling which public services are offered.

“And I told [my state representatives], ‘Now you know, so this is on you. I’ve told you I’ve done the best I can. I’ve gone months without a paycheck, but now it’s on you. So you need to decide what you want to do. Are you going to continue to play this silly game, or are you going to do what you promised to do and pay people for the services you contracted to provide?’ There was a little eye rolling of course, but it needed to be blunt and clear because that truly was the next thing that was going to happen.”

~Respondents A7/A8

The NPOs have little say and few options when politics immobilizes the mechanisms that traditionally deliver public services.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC SERVICES DELIVERY

Time, money, and human capital are finite resources in extremely short supply in organizations providing public services. In the short term, the political imbalance and resulting immobilization of public services harmed NPOs by not delivering on payment for services, which required organizations to spend resources on fighting for survival. The organizations’ time, money, and human capital resources became overly strained. Their finite resources were diverted away from providing services to communities in need. Ultimately, the people the NPOs intended to help were the most harmed by the politics–public administration dichotomy imbalance.

TABLE 2

IMPACTS AND COSTS OF THE ILLINOIS BUDGET IMPASSE ON HUMAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS INCLUDED IN STUDY

ORGANIZATION MISSION AREA (N)	LOST OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH & INNOVATION	REASSIGNMENT OF CONTRACTS	REBUILDING COSTS	LOSS OF HUMAN & SERVICE CAPACITY
Child welfare via crisis intervention (7)	1 3.4%	2 6.9%	2 6.9%	5 17.2%
Vulnerable adults via residential/direct services (14)	3 10.3%	3 10.3%	4 13.7%	11 37.9%
Victim advocacy via crisis intervention (6)	1 3.4%	0 0%	2 6.9%	6 20.7%
Poverty alleviation (2)	1 3.4%	0 0%	0 0%	2 6.9%
Total Number of Organizations Reporting Impact or Cost (29)	6 20.7%	5 17.2%	8 27.6%	24 82.7%

Twenty-nine subjects in this study reported direct costs to or anticipated impacts on their organizations (Table 2). More than four-fifths of those NPOs (82.7%) reported a loss of human and service capacity. For example, several NPOs reported program closures, reductions in force, furloughs, and reduced hours/client loads. It is not surprising that the greatest impact was the loss of human and service capacity. The reduction of expenses is a logical business response to a significant loss of revenue, and most expenses in the nonprofit sector are associated with direct program expenses. A reduction in capacity

to serve adults through residential and direct services, reported by 37.9% of respondents, was most common, followed by reduced victim advocacy via crisis prevention (20.7%) and reduced support for child welfare through crisis intervention (17.2%). Another disturbing result is that more than a quarter of organizations (27.6%) also expect to bear the burden of significant rebuilding costs due to the funding impasse.

Unfortunately, several NPOs in our study had to turn people away due to capacity issues such as program closures or the reassignment of staff.

“[W]e had to shut down [Program X] for a while. We were not getting paid for [these types of] programs, so, the impact was really felt on the family side of things—families felt that immediate impact.”

~Respondent L8

Concerns about service quality were also common, with almost every small NPO voicing their inability to meet staff-intensive service needs, such as counseling or day centers. This was particularly true in rural areas, where branch offices helped cut down on travel for clients and travel costs for NPOs. Branch closures and limitation of service hours doubled the impact for vulnerable rural citizens.

The impact that political immobilization of public services had on citizens was most visible at the local level of government. Local governments, being closest to their constituents (Parks, 1990), were affected when their communities did not receive critical services. Human service needs are not dictated by fiscal year; those needs continue year-round. Local governments were left to patch together solutions in their own resource-constrained environments exacerbated by other budget-related challenges such as changes to public education funding (Kiracofe, 2018).

Vendors, property owners, and local economic development initiatives were also affected. NPOs had previously signed contracts with the state to provide these services. They developed budgets based on the executed contracts, agreeing to take on fixed expenses necessary to execute those contracts. They hired and trained staff, purchased facilities and equipment, and signed subcontracts needed to deliver services.

“These programs are not like light switches that you can go like, ‘today we want a homeless youth program, tomorrow we don’t.’

They're stuck in leases and program space and they have expenses that continue on even if you suspend them. And so an organization doesn't have the ability to turn on a dime."

~Respondent S5

When the state failed to pay their bills for years, the NPOs' cash, reserves, and credit were strained. Local vendors and landlords did not receive payments for invoices or rent. Eventually, staff was furloughed or downsized outright. Organizations shut their doors. The unemployment rate in Illinois rose to the highest in the country, in part due to the impasse (Garcia, 2017). Ultimately, local economies suffered far beyond the human service providers alone.

The second largest impact reported (27.6%) was related to anticipated rebuilding costs. Rebuilding costs included things such as the cost of turnover, hiring, interest on new debt, and purchasing equipment after the impasse was over and payments were restored. Significant expenses and losses of funds were associated with both the loss of the program and the cost to redevelop the program once the impasse was over. This result may be somewhat surprising because these expenses were not calculated in the costs of the impasse as reported by the state comptroller's special report (State of Illinois Comptroller, 2018). The total cost of rebuilding programs has yet to be quantified, and the true cost of the impasse is not yet fully known.

Lost opportunities for growth and innovation (20.7%), as well as reassignment of contracts (17.2%), were relatively comparable in prevalence. The survival strategies employed by the NPOs resulted in reduced capacity and fewer opportunities to engage in growth and innovation. Subjects reported a lack of human and financial resources to devote to emerging programming needs in their communities, leaving these needs unserved or the responsibility of the local government. As reported by interviewees, the extended length of the impasse and the reduction of capacity as a survival strategy led to many NPOs reassigning contracts as a means of survival.

WHY DOES POLITICS AFFECT PUBLIC SERVICES?

Politics precedes public services in the policy process. Politicians who recognize their control over the necessary output of the policy adoption stage—the budget—can use the process as leverage in what subjects of this study described as “political games.” Why would legislators participate in political games that

halt the process? Why were NPO staff, boards, and citizens seemingly not more engaged in the fight? Why does our system allow for this battle to occur in the first place? There are several potential causes.

POTENTIAL CAUSE 1: POLITICIANS MAY NOT FULLY UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEMIC EFFECTS OF HALTING A BUDGET PROCESS

Part of the beauty of a representative democracy is that politicians come from all career backgrounds and from all walks of life; however, it is not uncommon for these officials to have little formal education or training in policy processes, public administration, or even political science. In some instances, officials holding public office may have little recognition of the domino effect on policy implementation. The state outsourced a substantial amount of its public service responsibility to NPOs; at the same time, our subjects reported that elected officials lacked knowledge about how state agencies purchase services. For example, some were unaware that federal money was also trapped in the state budget pass-through process. When an executive director of a small direct service organization visited the Capitol, she asked her representative how her organization could survive the half-million-dollar deficit resulting from nonpayment for their state-contracted services. She reported that the representative shrugged and told her to fundraise.

POTENTIAL CAUSE 2: DIRECT SERVICE NPOs LACK LEGAL PROWESS TO FIGHT BACK WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

NPOs' ability to take on government is reduced by their limited capacity and means. The organizations lack the legal capacity to force a behemoth contractor like the state to comply with their own contracts; plus, NPOs may not want to jeopardize future contracts by being a "squeaky wheel" despite the hardship imposed. The vast majority of NPOs' resources are spent on providing direct services, in part because that is historically how NPOs were measured for efficiency. Even if they had the legal and pecuniary resources, litigation would work against their best interests to fight for payment since it would increase their overhead-to-direct service expenses ratio. Constraints on NPOs leave them with few mechanisms to right inequities, ultimately leading to a David and Goliath dynamic.

POTENTIAL CAUSE 3: RE-ELECTION PRESSURES ENCOURAGE SHORT-TERM POLICY WINS, LEAVING LONG-TERM INACTION

Illinois has a bicameral, single-member district legislature. Members of the Illinois House of Representatives are elected to two-year terms without term limits, and members of the Senate serve two four-year terms and one two-year term, without term limits. A continuous re-election cycle means politicians campaign while serving constituents. Perhaps the constant pressure for re-election forces politicians to focus too heavily on short-term wins that can be touted during a campaign.

“[L]ess than two months into the budget impasse, I had a small group meeting with the governor with maybe three or four other advocates in the room. And he shook my hand and he looked me in the eye and he said, ‘I’m so sorry about what’s happening to you. I wish there was something I could do.’”

~Respondent A3

Human service organizations’ missions are recognized as valuable, but political obligations are viewed as more urgent.

POTENTIAL CAUSE 4: ASSIGNING BLAME IS EASIER THAN DELIVERING HUMAN SERVICES

Politicians face pressures from all angles: constituent needs, party politics, and re-election expectations. Politicians struggling to balance these pressures may find it easier to participate in something known as the “devil’s shift” (Sabatier & Weible, 2007), which assigns blame and points a proverbial finger.

“After visiting more than 45 legislators and districts to talk to them about the budget impasse, we found the legislators were pretty uniformly sympathetic to the plight of providers, but they consistently blamed the other side of the aisle for the problem. If we talked to Republican legislators they said, ‘Well, have you talked to the speaker again?’ And if we talked to Democratic legislators they’d say, ‘Well, you need to be talking to the governor. This is not ours; we didn’t create this problem.’”

~Respondent A3

When the devil's shift occurs during legislative session, NPO leaders are left without the political capital necessary to press their representatives on the state's contractual obligations.

MOVING FORWARD

The 736-day budget impasse negatively affected the entire population of Illinois and will continue to adversely affect populations for generations. The problems facing NPOs were compounded by a partial roll-back in the state income tax rate, reducing annual income tax revenues by more than \$4.5 billion between Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 and 2016 (State of Illinois Comptroller, 2018). The state also failed to control spending at the same time and was unable to pay its bills in a timely manner. The backlog of unpaid bills put the state in over \$14.7 billion in debt (a three-fold increase since only a few years before). Since the passage of a state budget on July 6, 2017, the state's unpaid bill backlog grew to more than \$16.7 billion in FY 2018, leaving the state unable to fully and immediately repair its social service safety net (State of Illinois Comptroller, 2018).

The state's most vulnerable populations still face general negligence from current inadequate funding of services. For example, more than 60% of NPOs that provide home-visiting services for young mothers still report drastic reductions in services due to staff layoffs and salary cuts. Recent changes (catalyzed by the budget shortfalls) in how families were deemed eligible for childcare assistance for low-income families resulted in 30,000 fewer children receiving services. NPOs providing preventative screenings for breast and cervical cancers were forced to reduce hours, resulting in increased waitlists and a 34% reduction in the number of women screened (Grigsby, Lifson, George, & Spitz, 2017).

Ultimately, the impasse led to lower prioritization of funding to the state's most vulnerable populations, who are also considered to be positive public spending multipliers that lead to enhanced economic activity. For example, spending on evidence-based substance abuse and mental health treatment has a 3.77 positive multiplier in economic activity (Rynell, Terpstra, Carrow, & Mobley, 2011). The reduction in funding (during the impasse and at current lower rates) for evidence-based early intervention programs is expected to generate negative individual impacts, a loss of capital in the community, a loss of economic activity, and increased spending on costlier alternatives (State of Illinois Comptroller, 2018). Moving forward, politicians may be able to avoid such long-term impacts by recognizing that their constituent-driven policy

agendas are directly tied to the long-term wins of these policies coming to fruition through implementation. Elected officials must value the long-term win of policy implementation as much as, if not more than, a short-term partisan win. What can the rest of us do to avoid such catastrophic impacts to our communities?

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Municipal officials and staff should aggressively advocate for local NPOs throughout the policy process, starting with agenda setting and continuing through evaluation.

Local governments are harmed when the state fails to fulfill its contractual obligations. Municipal officials are often left to patch together insufficient solutions to policy problems. There may be more efficient ways to approach the problem. Human sector organizations and local governments share a common vision to achieve healthy, safe communities. Shared goals make them natural partners in a collaboration that would likely benefit both partners. Local government representatives are often more experienced in advocating for their interests with the state and have the capacity to do so, whereas NPOs often do not. For example, in the 1990s, the State of Florida reformed workers' compensation, leading to insurance premiums tripling for NPOs. Local foundations, the Chamber of Commerce, the Jacksonville Community Council, Inc., and the City of Jacksonville collaborated on the development of a local nonprofit advocacy organization—the Nonprofit Center of Northeast Florida (NCNEF). NCNEF successfully advocated for a carve-out for nonprofits, ultimately saving many nonprofits from demise (Jesse Ball Dupont Foundation, 2003). If local government representatives intervene through advocacy earlier in the policy process, they may be able to reduce or completely thwart the gap in services they are often left to cover later.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Publicly funded NPOs should make it a priority to build networked capacity in contract law and advocacy.

NPOs are faced with major disadvantages when the state does not meet its contractual obligations, and organizations must be able to respond swiftly with legal action to maintain their contracts and fulfill obligations to their communities and employees. In a David and Goliath situation, the best

way for an underdog to win over a bigger, stronger adversary is to change the parameters of the game (Gladwell, 2013). NPOs must find ways to turn disadvantages into advantages. Their smaller size makes them nimbler, more adaptable, and capable of quickly reorganizing into a network. For example, the Colorado Nonprofit Association, which represents over 1,300 nonprofits, has won significant policy battles on behalf of their members. They successfully advocated for the establishment of a state income tax credit for donations to nonprofits, one of only five states to do so. The Institute for Nonprofit Innovation and Excellence in Florida, which is a network of several hundred nonprofit members, provides members with pro bono legal work in collaboration with the law firm Holland & Knight. In Illinois, coalitions of NPOs providing state- and federally funded services fought arduous legal battles, and in some cases, the courts ordered the state to administer payments for service. For example, a coalition of organizations serving people with developmental disabilities employed a 2011 court decree, *Ligas v. Norwood* (2015), and forced the State of Illinois to make its contractual payments. The increased network capacity of these NPOs helped them surmount their individually limited capacity. Figure 2 (on page 106) presents the networked relationships between the members of our sample, which demonstrates an intersecting, interdependent, and likely similar experience. If these organizations were able to find similar ways to strengthen their network ties, they may be more apt to share resources to present a stronger legal and advocacy approach.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Constituents should more extensively communicate with their elected representatives and advocate their preferences regarding the human services sector than they did prior to and during the impasse.

Constituents must reclaim their rights in the political process through increased education and engagement. Our subjects reported that the general public had even less of a grasp of the contracting and budget process complications than did state legislators. Advocacy associations should develop better systems to help constituents understand these complex issues and form processes that can be used by constituents to communicate their policy preferences. Did more calls to the local legislator occur when programs or staff were cut? Was there more media interest and coverage when the executive director gave a press conference or when the local chamber of commerce or mayor made remarks on the NPO's behalf? Building information and communication networks

with constituents is essential so that when this situation happens again, the resilience of your community will help shield everyone—especially the most vulnerable members.

CONCLUSION

Politics and public administration do not exist in silos. The policy process starts with problem identification and ends with implementation and evaluation, tying politics and administration together. Despite a myriad of alternative hypotheses for what caused the impasse and the negative impacts upon NPOs (e.g., increased consumption of the state budget by entitlement programs), the 2015–2017 budget impasse demonstrates strong evidence of a less harmonious relationship between politics and public administration than previously theorized. As demonstrated by the budget impasse, the entanglement between the two can have detrimental impacts on the human services sector. Politicians used their positioning within the policy process to leverage the implementation of human services. The intended effect of their political maneuvering resulted in an unintended trickle-down effect that hurt constituents and will likely negatively affect the state for years to come.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Lutheran Social Services of Illinois was not a member of this study and is referenced solely as an example of one of the organizations affected by the budget impasse.

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