

Kontroll eller handlingsfrihet?

– en studie av organiseringens betydelse i socialbidragsarbetet

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av

Ingrid Byberg
Socionom

Institutionen för socialt arbete

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Stockholms universitet

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze whether the manner in which social assistance activities are organized at a local level explains the large differences in costs for social assistance found between different municipalities in Sweden. Furthermore, we examine whether the organizational form has an impact on democratic aspects and equal treatment, e.g. clients' possibilities to have an urgent assessment made of their situation, to which they are entitled according to the Social Services Act.

The present thesis is based on data collected from four strategically selected municipalities: two pairs of "municipality-twins", each pair consisting of one municipality with unexpectedly high expenditures for social assistance – when considering the structural conditions - and one with unexpectedly low expenditures, but with many similarities between them as regards other factors (population, types of industries etc). Three weeks were spent at each municipality collecting data which consisted of questionnaires to the social assistance officials (n=71), social files (n=418) and other document sources, observations of meetings where decisions on individual cases were taken (6-7 meetings in each municipality), interviews, spontaneous conversations and a desk review on the municipalities' handling of appealed decisions.

The main conclusion is that, in addition to structural factors, the structure of the Social Service organization and the manner of execution of the work are also relevant to the explanation of the variation in cost for social assistance. The pervasive pattern that emerges through the findings enables us to formulate an empirical-based hypothesis about the connection between organization and social assistance: a higher degree of bureaucracy, i.e. with specialized processing of social assistance, together with carefully composed, standardized methods and a coherent and elaborated verification and communication system, results in lower costs for social assistance, provided that the compliance to established practices is continuously monitored by management.

Furthermore, the study shows that when significant room for independent decisions is given to officials, clients run the risk of being treated in a biased way as a consequence of the application of the individual official's personal judgement in each case, which is potentially inconsistent. The legal rights of the clients, such as the right to equal treatment are thereby jeopardized. Therefore, the results suggest that public authorities, which must adhere to legislation and consider democratic aspects, ought to be organized in a more bureaucratic way in order to limit the officials' room for discretionary decisions.