

# Everyday Resistance to Workfare: Welfare Beneficiary Advocacy in Auckland, New Zealand

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*Beneficiary advocacy organisations, which provide advice to individual claimants about how best to navigate the welfare system, exist in the context of complex and opaque benefit-claiming processes that have resulted from workfare policies. Drawing on a case study of Auckland Action Against Poverty, an organisation specialising in poverty activism and services for welfare beneficiaries, this article examines the provision of beneficiary advocacy services as a form of everyday resistance to workfare policies. Everyday resistance is less overtly political, less confrontational, and more ordinary than spectacular acts of resistance, such as protests, but one that should not be seen as accommodating workfare policies and the market-based reform projects to which they are connected. By supporting individuals to defiantly persevere with their benefit claims, beneficiary advocates help to actively resist the operational logic of dissuasion that defines contemporary workfare.*

**Keywords:** Workfare, social security, resistance, advocacy, neoliberalism.

## Introduction

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 2016, the central Auckland office of labour hire and recruitment company Manpower Services became an unauthorised site of protest (Murphy, 2016). A small group of people

affiliated with Auckland Action Against Poverty (AAAP), a non-profit organisation specialising in poverty activism and services for welfare beneficiaries, occupied the office and refused to leave. Others picketed at the street-entrance with a banner that read ‘stop profiting from poverty’. The protest was catalysed by reports that Work and Income—the government agency responsible for administering social security benefit payments—had asked beneficiaries to sign exploitative employment agreements with Manpower Services that allegedly did not specify pay rates, work hours, or work locations, and allowed the company to collect information about a person’s race, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, and political views. Under the prevailing system of conditions and sanctions, if a beneficiary refused to sign the agreement, or did not abide by the conditions of employment, they risked having their benefit suspended for 13 weeks. ‘Work and Income are supposed to support people into secure employment’, AAAP spokesperson Vanessa Cole said, but ‘instead they are forcing people into a poverty trap’ (AAAP, 2016: n.p.).

Protests like this have been a consistent response to the ascendancy and consolidation of work-focused welfare policies—commonly known as workfare—across the world (cf. Weitz-Shapiro, 2006; Reese, 2011; MacLeavy, 2015). As sporadic, confrontational, and highly visible displays, protests are one of the more spectacular ways by which organisations and members of the public have sought to resist successive work-focused transformations to welfare systems since the 1990s. While the specific details surrounding grievances and proposals vary considerably, protest actions are united in their intent to confrontationally oppose policies that have made the receipt of social security benefits conditional on completing work-related activities. Workfare policies have been labelled in various ways, including active welfare, welfare-to-work, and work-first, but as Brodtkin (2013: 7) points out, ‘workfare-style policies around the globe share a familiar programmatic tool kit’ of work-readiness assessment, job search, work preparation, and work experience. Where the post-War welfare state was founded on the idea that the burden of responsibility fell on the state to relieve individuals from poverty, workfare policies have redefined the nature of responsibility (McDonald and Marston, 2005). Backed by the threat of sanctions involving benefit suspension and repayment, individuals are held responsible by the state to fulfil a series of work-related conditions. As the spokesperson for AAAP identified in her comment about ‘the poverty trap’, a common outcome of such conditions is participation in precarious,

low-wage segments of the labour market, with highly constrained pathways for upward mobility (Peck, 2001; Herd *et al.*, 2005). Forms of overt and confrontational resistance continue to play an important role in efforts to contest workfare policies and broader projects of market-based, or neoliberal, welfare reform to which they are connected (Peck, 2001). Indeed, some have argued that protests have become an ever more crucial method for publicising and politicising areas of policy that have been de-politicised through technocratic modes of governing and expanded areas of cross-party policy consensus (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014).

But might there be other forms of workfare resistance that are deserving of attention? In April 2016, AAAP conducted a less confrontational but no less significant intervention than the protest that would unfold some months later. In the South Auckland suburb of Mangere—an area with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage—an annual ‘Benefit Impact’ event took place over three days outside the local Work and Income branch. Over 100 volunteers and AAAP staff provided advocacy services to over 700 welfare beneficiaries who, according to AAAP, were subsequently awarded approximately NZ\$850,000 in social security benefits (Interview #1). Organisers estimated that just as many people had to be turned away. Advocates provided claimants with advice and support to demonstrate their eligibility for benefits under existing legislative provisions. The increased workload from these claims was anticipated by Work and Income, which added about 30 staff for the event. Underscoring the strangeness of a situation where making benefit claims through existing legislative provisions requires specialist advocacy services and a special-purpose annual event, AAAP’s founder Sue Bradford noted: ‘[t]he irony is that what we’re doing over these three days is what [Work and Income] should be doing every day’ (Swannix, 2016: n.p.).

Using the work of AAAP as a case study, this article examines the provision of welfare beneficiary advocacy services. Beneficiary advocates—whether volunteers or employees—provide advice to individual claimants about how best to navigate the welfare system. This typically includes advice about benefit eligibility, about how to effectively claim benefits, and about how to appeal decisions. It can also include the provision of support during meetings with case managers and other welfare bureaucrats. As workfare policies enter their third decade in many countries, analysts have commented on the increasingly complex array of conditions that confront a person wishing to claim

social security benefits (Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Humpage and Baillie, 2016). The benefit-claiming process has also become opaque, due to the augmentation or replacement of formerly rule-based eligibility criteria with the discretionary judgement of street-level professionals, such as welfare case managers (McDonald and Marston, 2005; Brodtkin, 2013). Beneficiary advocacy exists as an organisational response to these circumstances. In the context of efforts that make claiming welfare benefits more difficult, we argue that beneficiary advocacy organisations enable a form of ‘everyday resistance’ to workfare (Scott, 1985). This form of resistance is less overtly political, less confrontational, and more ordinary than spectacular acts such as protests, but one that should not be seen as assisting or accommodating neoliberalisation. By supporting and resourcing individuals to persevere with their benefit claims, beneficiary advocates are actively resisting the operational logic of dissuasion that defines contemporary workfare and, by extension, the institutional and administrative pressure to ‘roll over’ for the process of neoliberalisation (Humpage, 2015).

The empirical component of this article is a qualitative case study of beneficiary advocacy services provided by AAAP. Documentary materials—including parliamentary proceedings, policy documents, practitioner literature, news coverage, and press releases—were collected through searches of media and government databases. Primary data were collected through interviews with five beneficiary advocates affiliated with AAAP, conducted in the second half of 2016, which provided insights into the daily work and personal motivations of beneficiary advocates. Through the case study of AAAP, the article seeks to understand the political and practical functions of beneficiary advocacy. One of the article’s authors (Davis) was a volunteer advocate at the time of data collection and has been regularly involved in AAAP initiatives, including the protest described at the outset.

The remainder of the article is structured around four main sections and a conclusion. First, we discuss the evolution of workfare policy and practice, paying particular attention to the increasing conditionality of social security benefits and persistent reliance on the deliberations of street-level professionals. Second, we conceptualise beneficiary advocacy and situate it in relation to understandings of everyday resistance. Third, we provide a summary of workfare policy developments in New Zealand to contextualise the empirical case. Fourth, we examine the practices of AAAP beneficiary advocates.

### **Contemporary workfare: increasing conditionality and enduring opacity**

Workfare policies have been supported—among many other factors—by discourses, theories, and beliefs about the moral virtues of work and the causes of unemployment. Liberal democracies have a long-held and long-shared moral commitment to the virtues of work, but they are less consistent, both over time and in comparison to one another, on the causes of unemployment (Marston, 2008). These differences have helped create a spectrum of workfare approaches. If structural explanations of unemployment exist in tandem with behavioural or individual explanations, workfare policies tend to be ‘softer’ or more enabling, emphasising training and support for individuals that would ‘make work in the labor market more feasible and rewarding’ (Brodkin, 2013: 7). In cases where behavioural explanations hold sway, workfare policies tend to be ‘harder’ or more punitive, aimed at forcing beneficiaries into available work through inadequate benefit payments, restrictive and opaque eligibility requirements, and extensive use of behavioural conditions and sanctions.

Although the precise balance of soft and hard workfare is prone to change, studies indicate a general trend in English-speaking countries toward the hard end of the workfare spectrum (cf. Herd *et al.*, 2005; Wright, 2012; Edmiston, 2016; Humpage and Baillie, 2016). The United States, for example, has practiced a lean and punitive version of workfare since its early adoption, by international standards, in the 1990s (Peck, 2001). In the British context, the adoption of ‘hard’ workfare measures has been gradual. Wright (2012: 309) notes that ‘priority has been given to cost-cutting, mounting compulsion, reducing eligibility and increasing jobseeking conditionality for wider claimant groups’. These changes have ‘made it more difficult to claim benefits, which are worth less in relative terms, are available for shorter durations and are more likely to be means-tested’ (p. 309). Importantly, such developments rely more intensely on administrative or street-level deliberations as a means of dissuading people from claiming benefits. In the Canadian context, Herd *et al.* (2005: 54) argue that workfare policy and administrative changes have subjected beneficiaries to ‘rituals of degradation’. Potential beneficiaries ‘may not apply either because they are never informed that they can receive help or because they believe they will receive so little that it is not worth the hassle of application’, they claim, while ‘others who successfully apply are so degraded that they either withdraw or are discouraged from seeking assistance

in the future' (p. 74). To summarise, then, contemporary workfare policies, at least in English-speaking countries, are characterised by the intensification of dissuasive measures that seek to 'revise the choice architecture of individuals' (Edmiston, 2016: 3). While low benefit amounts are used as a key dissuasive measure, the academic literature points to two further measures that we will briefly discuss: (1) the growth and complexity of conditions, and (2) the general uncertainty or opacity of the benefit-claiming process.

First, the evolution of workfare has been associated with increasing and more complicated conditions facing beneficiaries. Citing 'increasing levels of conditionality', Humpage and Baillie (2016: 17) note that the 2008 global financial crisis and subsequent austerity agendas has 'provided the rationale for a new wave of welfare reform in many countries' (see also Edmiston, 2016). In a recent study of the British welfare system, for instance, Watts *et al.* (2014: 1) explain that the use and severity sanctions has increased and conditionality had been extended to groups that were previously exempt. The same study also points to a shift in the type of conditions being applied to welfare beneficiaries. Supplementing 'conditions of category' (eg. being unemployed, being a single parent) and 'conditions of circumstance' (eg. meeting a certain level of material need), which were part of publicly-funded welfare since its beginning, workfare policies have emphasised and increased 'conditions of conduct', which require work-related and other types of behaviour from a beneficiary (Clasen and Clegg, 2007 cited in Watts *et al.*, 2014: 2). In the space of ten years, what was once seen as 'creeping conditionality' in workfare policy and administration (Dwyer, 2004) is now referred to as 'ubiquitous conditionality' (Dwyer and Wright, 2014).

Second, workfare policies have vested considerable responsibility in front-line welfare organisations and their employees to deliberate over the application of conditions. The transition to workfare has typically involved the devolution of responsibility to front-line organisations through legislative provisions that provide scope for interpretation, and through administrative strategies, such as contracting and performance management (Peck, 2001). These efforts empower 'street-level bureaucrats' by expanding their role from an *applier* of strict, rule-based conditions to a *deliberator* over flexible, interpretive conditions (for a discussion of literature on street-level bureaucracy, see Brodtkin and Marston, 2013). From a beneficiary perspective, such deliberations can appear uncertain

or opaque. However, according to Brodtkin (2013), these ‘ordinarily unseen dimensions of organizational practice’ (p. 5) have ‘quietly shift[ed] street-level practices away from social support and investment and toward greater social regulation’ (p. 280). In the context of greater social regulation, engagements between beneficiaries and the street-level organisations tasked with administering benefits have been seen as a ‘contested and contingent space of policy practice’ (McDonald and Marston, 2005: 376). These spaces are arguably more contested and more contingent with the growing complexity of conditions and opacity of assessment. While street-level practitioners may act in a way that supports beneficiaries, they may also ‘go to great lengths to discourage voice, claims making, and the assertion of rights, avoiding—even suppressing—efforts by individuals to discuss their needs and life circumstances’ (Brodtkin, 2013: 29). In response, claimants have been shown to ‘actively defend and contest the ideals, operation and outcomes of social citizenship through their everyday attitudes and engagements’ (Edmiston and Humpage, 2016: 7). The apparent significance of street-level interactions between beneficiaries and state-authorised agents has led for calls to examine the ‘operational core’ (Brodtkin, 2013: 10) of contemporary workfare. In the following section, we turn to discussing welfare beneficiary advocacy and its relationship to workfare’s operational core.

### **Beneficiary advocacy as everyday resistance**

Welfare beneficiary advocacy can be seen as a type of social work practice, wherein advocacy efforts are intended to assist ‘people subject to discrimination, other forms of injustice and indignity, or simply bureaucratic bungling’ (Richan, 1973: 220). In social work literature, it is common to distinguish between ‘case’ and ‘class’ advocacy. Case advocacy is ‘an intervention on behalf of an individual client or identified client group with one or more secondary institutions to secure or enhance a needed service, resource, or entitlement’ (McGowan, 1987: 92). In this sense, case advocacy is necessarily ‘remedial’ (Midgley, 2001), operating within established rules to achieve beneficial outcomes for an individual or small group (eg. a family). This commonly involves representing claimants in their interactions with street-level organisations, providing information about their rights and entitlements, and teaching skills so that they can advocate on their own behalf (Ezell, 2001). Beneficiary advocacy is, thus, an example of case advocacy. Class advocacy, on the other hand, is ‘an intervention to change a policy or practice

on behalf of a group of clients who share the same problem or status' (Ezell, 2001: 25). This type of advocacy is applicable to an entire 'class' of people (eg. all people on unemployment benefits) and is directed at changing the rules affecting those people, rather than working within those rules. Common activities related to class advocacy include lobbying decision-makers, disseminating research, media commentary, coalition building, political campaigning, and protests (for an account of class advocacy in response to welfare reforms, see Reese, 2011).

Although beneficiary advocacy is remedial, it enables remediation by helping beneficiaries resist, rather than conform to, aspects of welfare. The increasing complexity and enduring opacity of the benefit-claiming process shows that welfare policies have created a welfare system that—functionally, if not intentionally—degrades the morale of beneficiaries (Herd *et al.*, 2005). Informational barriers, circuitous and time-consuming compliance and appeal processes, and ambiguous eligibility criteria are some of the ways in which beneficiaries are dissuaded from public welfare and persuaded to secure their wellbeing elsewhere, through work, family, and charity. The 'operational core' of contemporary welfare is defined by an operational logic of dissuasion. By resourcing and supporting claimants to persevere with their benefit claims, beneficiary advocates counter the dissuasive institutional and administrative pressures that welfare policies have engendered in the welfare system. In this context, beneficiary advocacy services represent a form of everyday resistance to, rather than accommodation for, welfare and related projects of neoliberalisation.

The concept of everyday resistance, beginning with James C. Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), emerged in an effort to understand strategies and practices of peasant resistance. While all forms of resistance exist in an 'oppositional relation to power' (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2016: 418), Scott (1989: 37) distinguished forms of resistance that directly and openly challenge the claims of the powerful from those 'invariably quiet, disguised, anonymous, often undeclared forms of resisting claims imposed by claimants who have superior access to force and to public power.' The latter forms of 'everyday resistance' ranged from obstructionism, such as foot-dragging and feigned compliance, to covert and uncoordinated acts of criminality. In the context of welfare, there is a similar distinction to be drawn between direct, open acts of resistance—whether in spectacular forms, such as protest, or more moderate forms, such as media commentary—and somewhat quieter acts of defiant perseverance.



For example, focusing on the ‘everyday relations of power’ in street-level welfare organisations, McDonald and Marston (2005: 397) frame instances where beneficiaries ‘refuse to act as a ‘recipient’, a ‘dependant’ or a ‘jobseeker’ as a form of resistance to workfare. Likewise, Edmiston and Humpage (2016: 10) highlight ‘subversive strategies’ of resistance practiced by beneficiaries, including half-hearted compliance and false reporting. In a similar vein, we claim that beneficiary advocacy services enable everyday resistance insofar as they equip beneficiaries to resist, through defiant acts of perseverance, the operational logic of dissuasion that has come to define contemporary welfare systems.

Beneficiary advocacy tends to be small scale and individually-focused. However, there are occasions where, drawing on Scott (1989: 34), such efforts ‘may have aggregate consequences all out of proportion to their banality when considered singly’. He notes that when a ‘pattern of quiet resistance both symbolically and materially ... becomes generalized ... the political situation presents new possibilities that previously seemed utopian’ (p. 58). In the following, we focus on the example of AAAP as a provider of beneficiary advocacy services, paying attention to the everyday resistance of individual beneficiaries as well as those occasions—namely the Benefit Impact events mentioned at the beginning of the article—where attempts are made to ‘aggregate’ or ‘generalise’ the consequences of beneficiary advocacy. Before discussing AAAP’s activities, though, we provide some context for them by summarising the evolution of workfare policies in New Zealand.

### **Workfare in New Zealand**

The basic trajectory of workfare in New Zealand bears strong similarities to other English-speaking liberal democracies, with a transition from a post-War welfare system based on social citizenship rights and needs-based eligibility to a system, from the 1980s, focused increasingly on individual obligation and behaviour-based eligibility. The ‘hallmarks’ of New Zealand’s welfare system at the time of its formalisation in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century were benefit entitlements ‘based on meeting categorical eligibility requirements, residency and an income and means test’ (O’Brien, 2013: 731). As the 1972 Royal Commission on Social Security outlined, the ‘the degree of need should be the primary test and criterion of the help given by the community’ and benefits should ensure that those in receipt ‘have the means of belonging to their community and enjoying a standard of living approaching that which is normal for

the community as a whole' (cited in O'Brien, 2013: 732). These foundational logics began to be eroded from the mid-1980s with an extended period of 'roll back' neoliberalisation. While largely economically-focused in its initial stages (see Kelsey, 1995), the project of neoliberalisation quickly expanded to areas of public social spending, notably the social security system (Humpage, 2015).

Successive governments have built and adapted the system of work-focused welfare benefits. Several analysts note a tendency for oscillation between 'softer' capacity-building approaches to workfare, typically promoted by Labour party governments, and 'harder' punitive approaches, typical of National party governments (O'Brien, 2013; Wilson *et al.*, 2013; Humpage and Baillie, 2016). Humpage and Baillie (2016) provide specific details of policy changes, but the general course of change can be summarised as follows: Labour governments (1984–1990) introduced relatively modest work expectations into welfare payments from 1985; National-led governments (1990–1999) tightened eligibility requirements and broadened work obligations for people on unemployment, sole parent, and disability benefits; Labour-led governments (1999–2008) reversed aspects of these changes, introducing intensive case management with a focus on 'social development'; most recently, National-led governments (2008–present) have embarked on a series changes that redouble 'hard' workfare, including the further broadening of work obligations for sole parent and disability benefit recipients, and the introduction of income management for young beneficiaries. As the explanatory notes for a recent reform bill make plain, the 'main objective of the changes is to ensure a fairer system of social assistance with an unrelenting focus on work' (NZ Parliament, 2010: n.p.). This period of reform has seen the state reduce its responsibilities for the provision of financial assistance to those in need, while increasing its focus on 'enforcement and oversight' (O'Brien, 2013: 731, see also Edmiston, 2016; Edmiston and Humpage, 2016) through a complex suite of eligibility and compliance conditions related to income-support payments and several supplementary support payments. As the Benefit Impact event mentioned at the beginning of the article suggests, these conditions—and the seemingly opaque processes of street-level deliberation involved in their enforcement—have made it challenging for many claimants to effectively claim and maintain their benefits. Reflecting workfare's operational logic of dissuasion, an unrelenting focus on work has created an unrelenting struggle for many people claiming benefits.

Around New Zealand, there are a number of organisations that provide advocacy services to beneficiaries, in the form of advice and/or in-person support, to help them navigate the institutional (eg. policy) and administrative (eg. Work and Income protocols and practices) landscape of the social security system. These include, but are not limited to, nationally-networked organisations, such as the Citizens' Advice Bureau, and more locally-specific organisations, such as the Beneficiary Advisory Service (Christchurch), the Benefit Rights Service (Wellington), and the Beneficiaries Advocacy and Information Service (Auckland). The most publicly-visible of these organisations is arguably AAAP.

### **The case of Auckland Action Against Poverty**

For AAAP, the provision of beneficiary advocacy services stems from an explicit organisational commitment to 'expose and oppose the government's welfare reforms, and to put forward constructive alternatives' (Russell, 2015: 58). Along with the organisation's other activities—including lobbying, media commentary, community education, and protests—the practice of beneficiary advocacy offers a way to '[stand] with people experiencing oppression and against an oppressive status quo' (Russell, 2015: 58). Sue Bradford, the organisation's founder, notes that '[w]hile we would be a lot happier if our work wasn't needed, the stark reality is that every day hundreds of people are denied the full assistance to which they're entitled from Work and Income' (Stock, 2016: n.p.). There are at least three defining features to the approach taken by AAAP advocates. First, influenced by theories of radical community development, AAAP advocates are taught to reject the framing of beneficiaries as clients, in favour of a 'competent solidarity' approach. Advocacy Coordinator Alastair Russell (2015: 61) explains:

The 'professional' and the 'client' are clearly different, and a clear imbalance of power exists. There is no sharing of a common interest. ... Within this model, it is perfectly acceptable to stay silent and spectate while a bureaucratic system spits people out into untenable situations. AAAP rejects the notion of the professional or expert doing things to compliant clients. We have personal experience of unemployment; we know we are no different from the people who come to us needing support to access their rights. We do not use the term 'client'. We work

with people. Their oppression is our oppression, their experiences are our experiences, their interests are our interests.

Second, advocates are trained to actively assert the rights of beneficiaries. Through their knowledge of relevant legislation and administrative protocols, ‘advocates take the position that ‘no is the wrong answer’ ... [and] when applications for benefit entitlements are denied by Work and Income, staff will not passively accept this decision’ (Russell, 2015: 61). Although AAAP advocates operate within existing rules—which beneficiaries could navigate without an advocate being present—advocates can alert beneficiaries to the existence of those rules and assist in pressing Work and Income case managers to apply them. The anecdote of one advocate illustrates the confidence and steady approach that can be necessary to have a benefit awarded:

he said he couldn’t [award a benefit]. I asked to see the manager because I knew [he] actually could, and he turned around and said ‘you advocates, you always want to see the manager; you can’t see the manager every time it doesn’t go your way’. I just said to him ‘look, we have a right to see the manager and I would like to, please’. So he went off to see the manager and came back and said ‘you’re right, we can do it’. So that’s my strategy. (Interview #3)

Third, advocates commented on their efforts to empower beneficiaries. For some, this meant practical empowerment, such that beneficiaries realise ‘how to do it themselves’ (Interview #5), while others stressed political empowerment gained through ‘a wider political analysis of why they are treated the way they are and [understanding that their] situation goes well beyond individual blame and fault’ (Interview #1). At the core of beneficiary advocacy, then, is practicing and teaching defiant perseverance, actively but quietly countering the operational logic of dissuasion that defines encounters between beneficiaries and case managers.

In specific terms, AAAP advocates assist beneficiaries to access and sustain their full benefit entitlements in two main ways. First, they advise beneficiaries about the benefits for which they are eligible, and assist them in demonstrating their eligibility. Due to the complexity and opacity of the

workfare system, eligible beneficiaries can forego benefits, either because they are not aware such benefits exist or they believe they are ineligible. As two AAAP advocates noted:

the actual text of [Work and Income documentation] is not written for people to understand, it's a hard thing to navigate and know what their rights are; and, of course, they're not told those things so people don't tend to know actually ... what their entitlements are. (Interview #3)

I found that there's a real disparity between what welfare recipients understand they're receiving and what the Social Security Act is actually about. (Interview #4)

This disparity has been exacerbated, in part, due to the increased reliance on supplementary benefits—such as rent assistance, food grants, emergency housing loans—as primary income-support payments have declined in real-value. The Child Poverty Action Group (2016: n.p.) explains that the ‘criteria for these extra payments are complex, and the systems in place fail to explain these clearly, making it very difficult for people to understand their entitlements’. In this context, advocates play a crucial role in advising beneficiaries about their entitlements and about how to take advantage of deliberative provisions, such as those relating to ‘exceptional circumstances’, which relate to many supplementary benefits.

Second, advocates provide advice and assistance for beneficiaries to avoid sanctions. The effective use of discretionary provisions is one of several ways that advocates assist beneficiaries to avoid or lessen sanctions. For example, if a beneficiary resigns from a job without a ‘good and sufficient’ reason, they are subject to a 13-week benefit suspension. Advocates advise beneficiaries that are often unaware of what constitutes a ‘good and sufficient’ reason, while also helping them prepare and deliver a persuasive case to Work and Income case managers. Another way to avoid or lessen sanctions involves verifying that sanctions have been applied according to the laws and regulations Work and Income must operate within. Advocates are trained to identify irregularities—such as errors in sanction notifications sent to beneficiaries—that can provide the grounds to annul a sanction (Smith 2016: n.p.). Advocates also advise beneficiaries on how to initiate and navigate formal appeal processes.

While the advocacy services provided by AAAP inevitably address individual beneficiaries and the specificity of their circumstances, Benefit Impact events provide the opportunity to ‘aggregate’ the consequences of everyday resistance by individuals (see Scott 1989). There are two main consequences of these mass acts of beneficiary advocacy. The first is to raise the consciousness of the public and decision-makers about workfare policies and their effects. By making the scale of unmet need publicly visible—through media coverage of the queues of people being assisted by AAAP advocates—the event emphasises the structural problems of the current system. Benefit Impacts offer a way to demonstrate ‘the disarray and dysfunction of the Work and Income system in New Zealand’, one advocate noted, elaborating that ‘the purpose of advocacy is to inform our wider political work ... so that the experiences of individuals can be linked together to see patterns of abuse and exploitation’ (Interview #1). Echoing this point, Alastair Russell (2015: 62) believes that the events provide ‘undeniable proof’ of the existence of widespread poverty and an ‘uncaring’ welfare system. The second consequence of Benefit Impact events is that they assist in building an oppositional movement, providing an occasion to create and renew connections with members of the public and relevant organisations. Commenting on the 2014 Benefit Impact, Russell (2015: 63) explains what he calls the ‘developmental’ outcomes of the event:

In the process of organizing the Benefit Impact, previously existing relationships are strengthened and new relationships established. [People] came from other benefit advocacy groups, faith-based groups, trade unions, community groups ... and [we] have continued to strengthen these links.

### **Conclusion**

Through a case study of AAAP, we sought to highlight the role of welfare beneficiary advocacy as a form of everyday resistance to workfare policies. Over several decades, workfare policies have created increasingly complex and opaque benefit-claiming processes, which have the effect of dissuading beneficiaries from seeking public assistance. By helping beneficiaries to defiantly persevere with their claims, beneficiary advocates obstruct and push back against the significant institutional and

administrative pressures placed on beneficiaries to ‘roll over’ and submit to the discipline of neoliberal reform (Humpage, 2015). Rather than breaking or re-writing the rules, beneficiary advocates assiduously *follow* the rules—often by cannily turning the ambiguities of street-level deliberative provisions to the advantage of beneficiaries—to counter the desired effects of welfare policies. In this way, beneficiary advocacy organisations are counter-bureaucracies that deserve greater attention within research literatures on welfare activism or street-level bureaucracy. Although beneficiary advocacy is, first and foremost, an individualised practice, AAAP’s Benefit Impact events suggest that when generalised beyond individualised encounters between beneficiaries and case managers, beneficiary advocacy can have aggregate consequences. By reframing, at least temporarily, a series of atomised, private struggles into publicly visible, structurally induced patterns of vulnerability, beneficiary advocacy can disrupt common understandings of welfare recipients, re-politicise welfare policies, and rally interest in oppositional movements that seek transformative developments.

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