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## Perspectives of Public and Nonprofit Managers on Communications in Human Services Contracting

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### ABSTRACT

Government contracts and grants constitute the largest funding source for the majority of nonprofit organizations. Contracts for complex services, such as those involved in delivering human services, pose substantial challenges for public and nonprofit managers. In this context, concerns have been raised about contract management capacity, including challenges related to proposal and contract development, implementation, and performance reporting, as well as the impact of contract monitoring tools on contractor performance. Relatively few studies have provided a cross-sectoral perspective on the concrete managerial skill sets needed to engage in the interpersonal and technical processes involved in effective contract management. This study reports qualitative findings from a survey of county and nonprofit human service managers regarding approaches to managing challenges that arise in contractual relationships. The results identify the important role played by communication in the relationships between contract managers, illustrate the content of formal and informal exchanges, and identify common perspectives on the characteristics of effective communications, including transparency, a balance of flexibility and consistency, and timeliness. Practice implications for contract management relate to enhancing communication strategies in order to promote stronger contract relationships.

### KEYWORDS

Communication; contracting; human services; managerial; nonprofit

Human services in the United States are delivered at the local level by complex networks of public, nonprofit, and for-profit agencies, linked in a wide array of contractual and collaborative relationships (Smith, 2012). Contracted services account for the majority of public human service expenditures by federal, state, and local government entities (Kettl, 2015). For the majority of nonprofits in the human services and other fields, government revenues via contracts and grants constitute the largest funding source (Boris, de Leon, Roeger, & Nikolova, 2010). Contracts for complex services, such as those involved in delivering human services to vulnerable

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populations, pose substantial challenges for public and nonprofit managers (Brown, Potoski, & Van Slyke, 2015; Romzek & Johnston, 2002). Contract management activities, including feasibility assessment, contract formulation, implementation, and performance evaluation, require a broad range of knowledge and capabilities related to substantive policy, negotiation and bargaining, and program monitoring (Amirkhanyan, 2011; Brown & Potoski, 2003; Joaquin & Greitens, 2012; Van Slyke, 2003). In this context, concerns have been raised about public sector contract management capacity to ensure the effectiveness of public human services, including challenges related to managing the transaction costs associated with negotiating, implementing, and enforcing contracts, as well as limitations to the impact of contract monitoring tools on contractor performance (Brown & Potoski, 2005; Fernandez, 2007; Fernandez, 2009; Van Slyke, 2007).

Parallel concerns in the nonprofit sector related to contract management challenges have emerged over the past several decades. Nonprofit human service organizations incur substantial transaction costs associated with contract management in complex human service delivery networks related to proposal and contract development, operations, and reporting (Gronbjerg, 1991). Organizational resources and technological capacity play an important role in determining the extent to which nonprofit agencies are able to engage in performance measurement for strategic purposes (Thomson, 2011), and organization size has been found to be associated with the level of nonprofit agency satisfaction in contractual relationships (Barton, Folaron, Busch, & Hostetter, 2006). Resource issues continue to challenge nonprofits engaged in contracting with government entities, as when the Great Recession increased funding unpredictability, complicating fiscal management demands (Never & De Leon, 2014).

Early research on the experiences of nonprofit organizations engaged in managing government contracts highlighted the complex “balancing act” that contracting requires of managers, which is rendered more difficult in circumstances where performance is difficult to measure or monitor (Hassel, 1997, p. 443). More recent studies have found that nonprofit organizations continue to struggle with performance reporting demands imposed by funders when they lack the time, resources, and expertise needed to engage in formal evaluation (Carman, 2010; Carnochan, Samples, Myers, & Austin, 2014). Insufficient organizational capacity for performance measurement among nonprofit human service organizations, related to funding levels, staff expertise, and information technology, diminishes the extent to which organizations can make use of performance information (Lee & Clerkin, 2017). Research on contracting for child welfare services has highlighted managerial challenges related to

designing monitoring systems that require continuous communication and other boundary spanning activities (Collins-Camargo, McBeath, & Ensign, 2011). In addition to technical challenges, performance measurement poses political challenges for managers, who must balance the interests of diverse stakeholders in efforts to define appropriate measures to monitor complex services (Carnochan, McBeath, & Austin, 2017; Kim, 2005).

Given the prevalence and scope of contracting in publicly funded human services, and the substantial challenges that contracting and contract monitoring pose to managers in the public and nonprofit sectors, relatively few studies have aimed to identify the concrete managerial skill sets required to engage in the interpersonal as well as the technical processes involved in effective contract management (Fernandez, 2007; Van Slyke, 2007). Consequently, research is needed to further our understanding of specific strategies employed by managers in their efforts to develop and sustain contract relationships in order to support contract implementation and performance. Notably, few studies have included the perspectives of public and nonprofit human service managers involved in cross-sectoral contractual relationships (for exceptions, see Amirkhanyan, 2009; Amirkhanyan, 2011; Campbell, Lambright, & Bronstein, 2012; Gazley & Brudney, 2007), making it difficult to compare managerial experiences and identify shared understandings or conflicting perspectives.

This exploratory study reports qualitative findings from a cross-sectoral survey of nonprofit and county human service managers in five California counties regarding their views on managing challenges that arise in contractual relationships related to contract design, service delivery, performance measurement, and other aspects of the contracting process. The study focus on individual managers is consistent with the emphasis in recent public and nonprofit administration scholarship on the value of understanding the perspectives and strategies of the actors involved in public sector accountability relationships (Yang & Dubnick, 2016). The current study applies insights from theories of relational contracting and relational coordination concerning the importance of interpersonal managerial relationships and communication intensity for resolving cross-sector collaboration challenges (Gittell, 2011; Romzek, LeRoux, & Blackmar, 2012).

The results contribute to the literature by identifying and explaining the central role that communication between contract managers plays in managing human service contract challenges. The study illustrates the array of formal and informal exchanges that occur, describes common cross-sectoral perspectives on the characteristics of effective communications, and examines variation in perspectives across the sectors and with respect to nonprofit agency size. Implications for county and nonprofit human service

managers relate to strategies for promoting effective communications in order to strengthen contractual relationships.

### **Managing contracting challenges in the human services**

Human service agencies seek to address complex social problems that are resistant to change, and characterized by unpredictability and uncertainty (Head & Alford, 2015). In delivering complex services to address complex problems, public and nonprofit sector agencies confront multiple, interrelated challenges, which include highly politicized environments, inadequate resources, indeterminate service technologies, difficult-to-define and -measure service outcomes, and diverse client populations (Hasenfeld, 2010; Lynn, Heinrich, & Hill, 2001; McBeath, Carnochan, Stuart, & Austin, 2017; Sandfort, 2010). These challenges have been described as key characteristics of the human service institutional context, in which uncertainty, risk, and complexity: (a) impact public and nonprofit organizational resources, technology, goals, and accountability; (b) involve variation in client needs and service processes; and (c) complicate internal and external managerial roles and tasks (Hasenfeld, 2010; McBeath et al., 2017). Contract management, representing a central component of the human service agency manager's external management role, is shaped by each of these challenges, as managers are called upon to respond to diverse stakeholder interests, allocate or advocate for scarce resources, select and implement effective service technologies, define and measure outcomes, and engage clients in services (Benjamin, 2008; McBeath et al., 2017; O'Regan & Oster, 2000).

The uncertainty, risk, and complexity that are fundamental to human service delivery increase the accountability challenges that characterize all public contracting (Brown, Potoski, & Van Slyke, 2006; McBeath et al., 2017; Van Slyke, 2007). To date, theories of contracting have illuminated many of the dynamics and challenges that play out in the contractual relationships between public and nonprofit human service agencies and managers. Drawing upon principal-agent theory, Brown and colleagues (2006; also see Brown & Potoski, 2005) note the central task of public contract managers related to achieving goals consistent with public policies, while minimizing transaction costs associated with negotiating, implementing, and monitoring contracts. They point to the accountability challenges facing public managers who use contract specification, monitoring, and enforcement to ensure that the nonprofit agency performs according to the contract, and does not exploit information advantages related to service costs or implementation for its own benefit. In contrast, stewardship theory emphasizes the shared values and common interests of county and nonprofit human service agencies, resulting in high levels of trust among

contracting partners, and obviating the need for costly contract monitoring and enforcement mechanisms (Lynn et al., 2001; Van Slyke, 2007). Although the proposed solutions to ensuring accountability differs in these frameworks, concerns with shared values and interests, trust between managers, and imperfect information regarding service costs and outcomes figure prominently.

Given the challenges associated with managing complex human service contracts under conditions of uncertainty, scholars have called for collaborative approaches to contract management, such as public-nonprofit partnering to design contract terms and performance criteria (Brown & Troutt, 2004; Head & Alford, 2015). Such approaches may be appropriate given the expectation of shared values and interests between nonprofit and public sector human service agencies, while narrow reliance on formal contract management strategies, such as contract monitoring and performance measurement, may be insufficient to address the need for trust and information that can facilitate joint problem identification and solving (Lamothe & Lamothe, 2012).

Although some researchers have found that performance measurement is associated with perceived effectiveness of accountability in contract management (Amirkhanyan, 2011), others have raised concerns about performance measurement approaches related to organizational capacity limitations, resource diversion, and mission drift (Carman, 2010; Ebrahim, 2005; Jos & Tompkins, 2004; Siltala, 2013). Nonprofit organizations may struggle to meet reporting requirements, while funders often make limited use of performance data in decision making (Carman, 2010). Performance measurement strategies may concentrate staff efforts on compliance activities, decreasing resources devoted to substantive client services (Jos & Tompkins, 2004; Siltala, 2013). In some instances, contracted agencies may respond to performance measurement regimes by engaging in opportunistic behavior aimed at meeting service targets rather than providing high quality services (Negoita, 2018). Accountability demands made by funders that focus on short term objectives can inhibit important organizational learning and interfere with the mission of nonprofit organizations (Ebrahim, 2005). Finally, performance measurement in the human services presents challenges for both public and nonprofit managers related to balancing multiple stakeholder perspectives in the process of identifying appropriate objectives and measures (Carnochan et al., 2017; Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011).

### ***Relational contracting to address human service contract-based coordination challenges***

Ultimately, formal accountability mechanisms such as performance measurement and contract monitoring do not operate in isolation, but are

carried out in the context of relationships among organizational actors (Ebrahim, 2005). Given the limitations associated with performance measurement, it is not surprising that less formal, relational approaches to contracting commonly exist in parallel with formal contractual relationships in human service delivery systems (Lamothe & Lamothe, 2012; Romzek & Johnston, 2005). Relational contracts are typically characterized by “trust, discretion, joint-problem-solving, and information exchange” (Van Slyke, 2007, p. 184). Managerial relationships can thus enhance and expand upon the formal contract (Bertelli & Smith, 2009). Moreover, managerial perceptions of the effectiveness of cross-sectoral partnerships are influenced by interpersonal relationships (Gazley, 2010a). Strengthening managerial relationships through effective patterns of behavior, norms, and expectations can increase the likelihood of achieving mutual benefits for nonprofit and public human service agencies (Brown et al., 2015). Human service managers, who engage in relational contracting work beyond organizational boundaries, act as boundary spanners, who must develop interpersonal skills that include effective communicating and listening (Oliver, 2013; Williams, 2002). In addition, human service managers engaged in relational contracting may be able to “co-construct meaningful approaches” to measuring the effectiveness of human services (Lynch-Cerullo & Cooney, 2011, p. 384).

In a similar vein, relational coordination theory has emphasized the importance of interpersonal relationship development characterized by norms of reciprocity, shared goals, and a common emphasis on communication quality and intensity (Gittell, 2011). When so engaged, boundary spanning managers can help cross-functional teams address longstanding as well as emergent issues, engage in problem solving, support conflict resolution, and promote performance measurement (Edmondson & Harvey, 2017; Gittell, 2011; Gittell & Logan, 2015). Overall, theoretical scholarship in the relational contracting, relational coordination, and public-private partnership domains highlights flexibility in cross-sectoral relationships to facilitate ongoing adjustments and problem-solving in the delivery of complex services (DeHoog, 1990; Head & Alford, 2015).

Empirical research on relational contracting has found that behavioral patterns and norms related to effective communication among nonprofit and public contract managers play an important role in the development of trust (Van Slyke, 2007). Attention to extensive communication, planning, and coordinating may help to ensure accountability on the part of nonprofit service providers (Brown & Potoski, 2005). Accountability can be maintained in collaborative, networked models of contracted human service delivery through close and continuous interaction between public agency and contractor staff (Negoita, 2018). For example, a study of local government managers in one state found that informal communications are



common, and are deemed by managers to play a significant role with respect to promoting accountability (Marvel & Marvel, 2009). In contrast, in a study involving funders and nonprofit human service agencies, county and nonprofit managers reported that discussion and collaborative efforts related to performance reporting were moderately common, but described relatively lower levels of satisfaction with the level of collaboration about performance feedback (Campbell et al., 2012).

Research thus highlights the role that managerial communication can play in strengthening public-nonprofit contract relationships by building trust and identifying shared values and interests, as well as promoting accountability by addressing concerns related to opportunistic exploitation of information asymmetry (Brown & Potoski, 2005; Van Slyke, 2007). Scholars have begun to examine more closely the association between communication quality and contract relationship strength, with some studies measuring communication quality as the extent to which nonprofit executive directors view their communication with public sector counterparts as good, feel heard by their counterpart(s), and believe they can easily initiate communications (Amirkhanyan et al., 2010; Amirkhanyan, Kim, & Lambright, 2012). Mutual understanding of contract terms and related behavior is critical, requiring clear communication through technological as well as direct personal interaction (Brown et al., 2015). Open communication, as well as frequent face-to-face contacts, have been found to be effective relational strategies (Vosselman, 2016). In a prominent study, Romzek and colleagues (2012) noted the important facilitative role that communication plays in developing informal accountability relationships within the context of collaborative service networks involving contractual as well as cooperative arrangements among organizations. Key themes related to communication included: the importance of frequent and sustained communication; information sharing as an obligation and a source of power; and reliance on multiple formal and informal communication channels (Romzek, LeRoux, & Blackmar, 2012). Finally, some research has found that organizational size is salient, with larger nonprofit human service agencies reporting higher levels of satisfaction with select aspects of contract communications (Barton, Folaron, Busch, & Hostetter, 2006).

In summary, the theoretical and empirical scholarship on managerial boundary spanning to promote organizational collaboration in contract-based human service delivery systems points to the importance of communication skills and processes in cross-sectoral relationships. Communication between organizational actors can strengthen relationships by identifying shared goals and building trust, while facilitating information exchange to promote accountability and joint problem solving of the complex issues that arise in the delivery of human services. A substantial literature



highlighting the role of communications in public contracting has focused on developing theoretical frameworks to understand public-nonprofit relational mechanisms, while calling for further empirical investigation (Bertelli & Smith, 2009; Brown et al., 2015; Oliver, 2013; Vosselman, 2016). Previous empirical research has contributed to the knowledge base, while tending to report on relatively narrow data sets, including studies in which: (1) nonprofit or public sector participants are absent (e.g., Brown & Potoski, 2005) or participate in small numbers (e.g., Romzek & Johnston, 2002; Romzek & Johnston, 2005); (2) overall nonprofit and public sector sample sizes are very small, as is appropriate for qualitative research (e.g., Van Slyke, 2007); or (3) the service field is limited to a single domain (e.g., Amirkhanyan et al., 2010; Amirkhanyan et al., 2012). Related research has described the purposes and goals of interpersonal, informal communication between managers in an array of collaborative interorganizational relationships that are not, however, dominated by formal contracts that specify roles and responsibilities (Romzek et al., 2012; Williams, 2002).

Therefore, insufficient empirical attention has been dedicated to the specific complex dynamics that characterize the contract-based coordination efforts of public and nonprofit human service managers, including their qualities of communication-related engagement, purpose, flexibility, and consistency (McBeath et al., 2017). To build on these efforts, we report qualitative findings from a multicounty, cross-sectoral survey of nonprofit and public sector managers responsible for overseeing contracts related to a diverse array of services, including child welfare, adult and aging, employment and housing services. The analysis identifies managerial perspectives on strategies for responding to challenges that arise in contractual relationships, and examines differences of perspective across the sectors and with respect to nonprofit agency size. The findings support the central role of managerial communications, illustrate the diverse content of contract communications, and identify shared and differing cross-sectoral views on the characteristics of effective cross-sector communications.

## Methods

The study is a component of a longstanding research program carried out by the authors in partnership with two regional consortia of county and nonprofit human service agencies. This analysis reports results from an online survey of managers in county and nonprofit human service agencies conducted in five San Francisco Bay Area counties in 2015. The survey design was informed by dyadic case studies conducted in three consortium counties in 2014 that explored contractual relationships between the county human service agency and a large nonprofit service provider, and by the

**Table 1.** County Agency Sample.

	<i>Urban/Suburban/Rural</i>	<i>Budget (millions)</i>	<i># FTEs</i>
County A	Urban/Suburban	723.8	2614
County B	Suburban	775	2150
County C	Urban	932.4	2055
County D	Suburban/Rural	133	578
County E	Suburban/Rural	339.5	970

relevant empirical and theoretical literature. While the survey collected primarily quantitative data (reported elsewhere), the subset of open-ended questions forms the basis for this analysis.

### **Sample**

The county human service agencies participating in the study are responsible for child welfare, employment and cash assistance, and adult and aging services, and reflect variation with respect to agency size and county demographics (see Table 1). The nonprofit agencies represented in the sample are similarly diverse with respect to agency size (ranging from 0 to 4,000 FTE) and budget (ranging from \$14,000–\$791 million) and provide a broad array of services to a diverse set of client populations. As 90% of the participating agencies were nonprofits (the remaining were private, for-profit contractors), we refer to nonprofit agencies throughout to simplify the narrative.

Survey invitations were sent to 295 county managers who were identified by study liaisons in the five participating county agencies as possessing knowledge of their agency's contracting processes and relationships with nonprofit contractors; 193 responded for a response rate of 65%. County managerial affiliations among survey respondents were: County A ( $n = 91$ , 47%); County B ( $n = 18$ , 9%); County C ( $n = 36$ , 19%); County D ( $n = 15$ , 8%); and County E ( $n = 32$ , 17%). Survey invitations were also sent to a primary contact (designated by county agency liaisons) at 329 nonprofit agencies with contracts with one or more of the five county agencies in FY 2013–2014. Responses were received from 483 nonprofit managers at 206 agencies, representing a 63% organizational response rate. Table 2 summarizes characteristics of county and nonprofit respondents related to employment role and experience.

Overall, the number of survey respondents is large for a qualitative study; however, fewer managers responded to the two open-ended questions upon which this analysis is based. In particular, 109 county managers and 210 nonprofit managers responded to at least one open-ended question.

### **Data collection**

The major survey domains related to: (1) contract-based communication and interactions; (2) perceptions of accountability systems; (3) managerial

**Table 2.** County and Nonprofit Manager Sample.

	<i>County managers</i>		<i>Nonprofit managers</i>	
	<i>Mean or %</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Mean or %</i>	<i>Range</i>
Executive	13%		52%	
Program	43%		21%	
Administrative	40%		23%	
Other	4%		4%	
Years in current position	5	0–28	9	0–42
Years in human services	18	0–47	19	0–50

attitudes and organizational norms; and (4) contract performance. Two open ended questions asked about strategies to improve contractual relationships, and address performance measurement challenges (see [Figure 1](#)).

**Analysis**

The first and fourth authors led the analysis, employing manual coding, analytical memos, conceptual mapping, and member checking strategies (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). In the first stage, inductive/in vivo coding was conducted jointly by the first and fourth authors in order to identify potentially new insights from the extensive qualitative data (Charmaz, 2014). The first author reviewed the data in total, and identified in vivo codes related to the context of managers’ contractual relationships and to managerial communications and provided illustrative excerpts for each code. The code structure was reviewed with the fourth author, who then coded the data and comprehensively extracted excerpts related to each code. The first and fourth authors developed analytical memos and conceptual maps proposing potential relationships between the codes for discussion among the study team, which identified managerial communications as the focus for the next stage of analysis.

This overarching theme related to communication was defined based upon the perspectives articulated by managers participating in the survey, as well as the literature on communications in public-nonprofit contracting. The definition of communication incorporated multiple formal and informal modes of communication, as well as a diverse array of issues and topics as described in the discussion of study findings. Formal modes of communication included the RFP and related guidelines, reporting guidelines, planned monitoring interactions, and required reports submitted by nonprofit agencies. Descriptions of informal communications concerned ad hoc in-person meetings, telephone calls, emails, and informal site visits. Both formal and informal communication methods referred to individual as well as group interactions.

Drawing on relevant literature to enhance the theoretical sensitivity of the analysis (e.g., studies of performance measurement and relational

Nonprofit manager survey	Public manager survey
We are interested in learning how you think contractual relationships with the county HSA can be improved. What strategies would help enhance the contracting process or address challenges in your relationship with the county HSA?	We are interested in learning how you think contractual relationships with contractors can be improved. What strategies would help to enhance this contracting process or address challenges in your relationship(s) with contractors?
Gathering and reporting information on service quality and program outcomes, and then reporting that information to the county HSA, can be challenging. If you can, please describe a challenge you have experienced related to these areas, and any steps your agency and/or the county HSA have taken to address this challenge.	For your contractors, gathering and reporting information on service quality and program outcomes, and then reporting that information to the county HSA, can be challenging. If you can, please describe a challenge you have experienced related to these areas, and any steps taken by your agency and/or your contractors to address this challenge.

**Figure 1.** Open-ended questions.

contracting), the first author reviewed the data again, identifying and coding themes related to communication (Gilgun, 2015). The communication themes, along with illustrative excerpts, were reviewed and endorsed by the directors of four nonprofit human service agencies that are partners in the regional nonprofit consortium. Each of these themes was prominent in both public and nonprofit manager survey responses, and across the five counties participating in the study. To further explore the existence of patterns or differences with respect to the prevalence of the themes across the sectors, we numerically coded the thematic open-ended data and examined via crosstabs the comparison of county and nonprofit responses with respect to each theme, identifying cross-sector differences within one of the themes as reported below in the discussion of findings.

Lastly, in response to research noting the role that agency capacity and size can play in contract relationships and performance measurement, we explored differences among nonprofit managers related to agency size. The open-ended response thematic data were numerically coded, and linked to quantitative items related to number of staff and total revenues from the nonprofit agency survey and a separate worksheet completed by nonprofit agencies. These linked data for nonprofit respondents were then examined via crosstabs in order to understand the extent of possible variation related to agency staff size and revenue in respondent perspectives on the communication themes. Staff size was defined as total employees with categories defined as small (1–19), medium (20–99), large (100–499), and very large (>500) (Deitrick et al., 2014). Agency revenue categories were defined as small (\$1–\$999,999), medium (\$1 million–\$499,999,999), large (\$5 million–\$9,999,999), and very large (>\$10 million) (NTEN, 2015). The analysis of differences among nonprofit respondents related to agency size did not

identify any consistent patterns or differences, and hence details of this analysis are not described in the report of findings. For example, within the themes where notable differences in the prevalence of the theme were observed, the pattern of difference typically varied across the two agency size measures. To illustrate, within one theme, with respect to the staff measure there was a difference of 14 percentage points between the prevalence of responses in the highest and lowest groups, and with respect to the revenue measure, this difference was 10 percentage points. However, the staff size category with the highest percentage of responses was large, while the revenue categories with (equal) highest percentage of responses were small and very large.

### **Limitations**

The study design and methods reflect several limitations in addition to the relatively low response rate for the open-ended questions. First, while the county sample provides substantial variation, it represents only five counties, and may not reflect experiences in other counties or states. Second, given the point-in-time survey design and anonymity of responses, we were not able to pursue follow-up inquiry with study participants to develop further the key themes identified in the analysis. However, the opportunities for member checking provide a level of corroboration for the findings. Finally, it is likely that contract relationships evolve over time in complex, context-dependent ways that this study was not designed to capture.

### **Findings**

When asked to identify strategies for responding to contract relationship and performance measurement challenges, respondents highlighted the central role of communication. They described: (1) the diverse content of managerial communications related to the contractual relationship; (2) the importance of communication in supporting effective relationships and addressing challenges; and (3) factors that they associate with effective communication. The description of the findings below explains and illustrates these common themes, and highlights instances where the analysis identified differences among respondents related to sector.

#### ***The content of managerial communications***

Respondents described formal and informal managerial communications that address a diverse array of issues throughout the contracting process that extend beyond contract negotiations and reporting (see [Figure 2](#)). Managers highlighted preliminary discussions related to identifying

Identifying needs and goals for service delivery system.	County manager: <i>We could meaningfully include client/stakeholder/community input in the RFP development process, at least the needs assessment stage.</i>
Developing RFP announcing county agency's intent to contract for particular services.	Nonprofit manager: <i>Actual performance and progress toward previous contract goals nor role in advocacy to secure funds was not fairly considered when allocating funds between contractors in a single RFP. We made it an issue and while it did not change the outcomes, we have become much more proactive in future contracts.</i>
Negotiating contract terms.	County manager: <i>Coming to agreement on clear outcome objectives and service objectives during the RFP and negotiating process that can then be tracked is difficult. We have begun to tighten this process up, but it is a challenge.</i>
Regularly exchanging information about service delivery.	County manager: <i>Contractors often serve the most challenging clients, and when unable to meet the outcomes, it gets difficult to have a frank conversation about what is happening. We are striving to build better relationship with contractors to have these conversations earlier on.</i>
Reporting by contracted agencies regarding services and outcomes.	Nonprofit manager: <i>In the latest round of contracts, we had multiple conversations about what outcomes to track and whether we could pull those outcomes out of our current tracking system. County [human services agency] has been willing to work with us to match their outcome needs with our current Homeless Management Information System tracking system so that we do not have to duplicate efforts</i>
Identifying problems and developing solutions.	Nonprofit manager: <i>Our relationship with the county has improved over the past year. Primarily because we have focused on improved relationships because of shared desired outcomes and increased transparency. We have been able to schedule more problem-solving meetings rather than waiting for something to go wrong.</i>

**Figure 2.** Contract communication topics.

community needs and goals, as well as more specific conversations about the content and process for Requests for Proposals (RFP). Communications related to contract reporting included the input of nonprofit managers regarding the selection of performance outcomes to minimize reporting burdens. Of particular interest was the emphasis on problem solving communications designed to prevent or anticipate difficulties throughout the contract process.

### ***Managerial communications and strong contractual relationships***

County and nonprofit managers emphasized the importance of communication in fostering positive relationships with their contract counterparts, or as one executive in a large urban county agency succinctly stated: “Communication, communication, communication.” Conversely, some managers noted that strong relationships enable effective communication throughout the contracting process. As an executive in a nonprofit multi-service agency explained: “We appreciate the close relationships that we have with our local HSA program and contract analysts. The relationships allow for two-way communication before, during, and after contract periods and flexibility when circumstances change.”

Regular and face-to-face communications were perceived by county and nonprofit managers as contributing to stronger relationships. A program manager in the public assistance division of a large suburban county noted: “Our HSA and contractor relationships are enhanced via open communication and regular meetings.” A county manager in a large urban/suburban agency described the way in which opportunities for direct, face-to-face communication promote trust and stronger relationships between county and nonprofit staff:

I think that there definitely needs to be a face-to-face meeting with the contractors and all of the Agency’s staff, so that people have a sense that there are humans behind these processes and to cultivate more rapport between the contractors and the Agency representatives. . . . Also, I’ve recently initiated one-to-one interviews, and have found these to be extremely effective with contractors. I think they like the ability to just connect with just one person, be candid, and also to be in their own space.

An executive in a nonprofit agency providing adult education services expressed concern about the absence of opportunities for regular, face-to-face communication offered by the county agency:

Gathering and reporting the information is routine and not difficult. We only have 1 or 2 face-to-face meetings a year, and I feel I have little knowledge apart from the basic info we collect and provide as to what service quality they are looking for and program outcomes. It could be this basic information is all they are concerned with. I feel if we had more face-to-face meetings in a year, communication and understanding could be greatly improved.

In addition to contract-specific dyadic exchanges, a number of respondents emphasized the value of network communications that bring together multiple contracted providers within a specific service area. A fiscal manager in a large urban county recommended regular meetings involving agencies providing related services as a strategy to improve contracting relationships: “Quarterly communication meeting where all the contractors under a certain program or area can come discuss issues and get updates on internal items.” Similarly, a fiscal manager in a large suburban county pointed to the need for additional forums for information exchange between county and contractor staff on a diverse array of topics related to contracts:

More steering committees based on services provided would be beneficial to the contractors and the agency. I currently attend a monthly/quarterly steering committee, which includes (HSA) contracts, performance evaluation staff, program staff and contractor staff. The meetings are highly informative, and all stakeholders are kept abreast of important issues relating to the delivery of services, performance, new policies/procedures, and other important contract issues. The contractor is able to share best practices, challenges, success stories, etc.



Finally, public and nonprofit managers pointed to the importance of two-way communications between nonprofit and county human service managers, as a strategy to improve decision making and achieve better program outcomes, while balancing power relations. An administrator in a large urban county highlighted the value of incorporating nonprofit perspectives in contract design:

Viewing the work of contractors more as shared work between partners who can each add critical information to the whole picture of service delivery, client assessment, and evaluation instead of a more one directional relationship in which the county agency tells the contracting agency what is needed, how much it can cost and how it is to be measured and reported would facilitate better outcomes.

An executive of a large, nonprofit multiservice organization also emphasized the value of bilateral communication, contrasting experiences in their contractual relationships with separate divisions of the county human service agency:

Because we contract with several arms of the HSA, we find that there are different levels of communication dependent upon which arm the contract is with. Contracting with one division, for instance, is easy: there is a lot of communication; we are made aware of programmatic and contract changes in advance; they work with us to find workable solutions; our representative is open and responsive to feedback. Some of the other divisions, however, are not as easy or open to work with, and communication is lacking or one sided. Sometimes we are simply told not to ask: they are not open to feedback, and communication is one sided.

### ***Factors supporting effective communication***

In addition to highlighting the importance of regular, face-to-face, two-way communications, respondents described three characteristics they associate with effective managerial communications related to human service contracts: (a) transparency, (b) balance of flexibility and consistency, and (c) timeliness.

#### ***Transparency***

County and nonprofit managers perceived transparency in communications as contributing to trust in contract relationships and strengthening understanding of complex contract issues. Respondents highlighted the importance of candid and accurate communications with respect to funding priorities and decisions, contract reporting requirements, and contract performance.

Nonprofit agency managers sought and appreciated transparency on the part of county agencies with respect to overarching community priorities, as well as specific funding criteria. An executive in a nonprofit organization

providing services to survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence spoke about the negative impact on trust between contracting agencies that results from a lack of transparency on the part of the county agency with respect to contract processes and funding decisions:

We would like to see [the] County be more thoughtful and transparent about awarding contracts and funds; seems like they sole-source when there are several qualified organizations. Conflicts of interest in relationships as to who gets funded, and often just as important is [the issue of] who knows what and when they know it. Things have been so relaxed for so long that an e-mail came out last year to a group of shelters where it was clear that one of the shelter directors knew before everyone else about the year's contract award. This creates serious mistrust and a lack of faith in the funding process.

Nonprofit managers also sought transparency related to the contract reporting process, including access to the data they were required to transmit to county automated data systems. An executive at a nonprofit agency providing supportive housing and social services to individuals with mental illness noted that access to performance data was very difficult:

We were requested to input information into (county data system), but were not able to access the system for many months. The system is not very user-friendly, and extracting any useful indicators for performance indicators is next to impossible. If we are entering data into a system, we should have the ability to access that data in a way that we can use.

Transparency regarding performance reporting requirements is similarly valued; as an executive at a nonprofit agency providing housing and supportive services to homeless adults and families noted: "Our agency has developed practices around data collection, data systems, and contract management. It would help for [county human service agency] to be more transparent and timely about their requirements."

Public managers emphasized the value of accuracy and candor related to reporting of client outcomes. A fiscal manager in a large urban/suburban county echoed the nonprofit manager perspective regarding the role of performance measures in ensuring the flow of adequate information about service delivery: "Training, transparency, and parity. We need to continue to standardize the measures for service categories and develop a unit cost within each category. That would increase transparency and parity." Another manager in a large urban/suburban county similarly highlighted transparency with respect to performance reporting, to ensure that contractors understand the way data are used:

We have different definitions of service, and they change sometimes with program interpretation. We worked to develop a transparent data sheet that explains to contractors how we achieve the numbers that illustrate their performance, and,

therefore, what we expect them to track. We have them submit numbers along with their invoices, and resolve them with our performance data.

Public managers also expressed views similar to those of nonprofit managers related to the need for clear communications regarding funding priorities and decisions. An executive in a large urban county agency explained the need for clarity about priorities and funding levels in an environment of limited resources:

All contractors would like more funding to maintain their organization. Due to a finite amount of funding, our department needs to put the services to customers as paramount. The key is to be very clear about the service needs and funding amounts in the Request for Proposals, so there is no misunderstanding once an agency has been funded.

### ***Balance of flexibility and consistency***

Consistent with guidance offered in previous scholarship on contractual relationships and public-private partnerships formed to provide complex services (DeHoog, 1990; Head & Alford, 2015), some nonprofit and county managers highlighted the importance of flexibility in contractual arrangements. The importance of flexibility was more frequently noted, however, among the nonprofit managers. Nonprofit managers emphasized the benefits of flexibility with respect to service delivery models and contract performance. An executive in a nonprofit housing agency highlighted the linkage between flexibility and innovation in service delivery: “It would be helpful if there was opportunity for more innovation and flexibility around service delivery models and focuses on outcomes.” The executive director of a large community development agency described the importance of flexible time frames with respect to achieving contract objectives, given changes in the community and the political environment:

Our program outcomes tend to be related to community processes and policy work, so our outcomes are typically difficult to fit into the box of service provision. This type of work is also impacted by community and political dynamics, and can be somewhat unpredictable, needing flexible time considerations for meeting our objectives.

Some county managers acknowledged the need to respond flexibly to challenges that contracted agencies experience related to contract reporting databases, by developing alternative data collection and reporting mechanisms. Several county managers focused on ensuring an appropriate level of responsiveness in contracting processes; for example, one manager in a large urban county stressed the intersection between flexibility, trust, and transparency, noting: “We can tighten up our contracting process to create more trust and flexibility in program interpretation, delivery, and reward.

We can move toward a real transparent performance-based contracting system and remove much of the politics that hinder progress.” The need for flexibility with respect to contract language was noted by a program manager in a large urban county, who reported: *“Contracts usually have a ‘standard’ language across programs, but it is not always relevant from one program to the next.”*

In contrast, many county and nonprofit respondents expressed challenges and frustrations related to a lack of consistency in various components of contract communications. As with perspectives on the value of flexibility, complaints about inconsistency were more common among the nonprofit managers than among the county managers, although the difference was not as great. The most frequent issue related to the proliferation of databases across different funding streams, sectors, county agencies, and programs. A program manager in a large urban county highlighted the need for greater consistency with respect to the data systems for performance reporting: “Agencies vary a lot in the degree to which they adopt technologies—lack of a standardized database platform across all agencies. Many times the agency may use a different system in managing the clients and service deliveries, which is different from the county reporting system.” An executive in a nonprofit agency providing health and social services to veterans similarly noted burdens imposed by incompatible data systems across multiple funders, describing agency efforts to develop technological remedies: “It has been hard to meet all the data requirements of multiple funders. It isn’t so much that they want different information as that they want the same information but in different ways. It can make data collection redundant and occasionally absurd. We have tried to work with our IT group to standardize and translate where possible.” An executive at a nonprofit legal services agency noted issues related to variability in reporting requirements and eligibility criteria, highlighting the constraints imposed by external funders:

Managing different reporting systems is challenging, particularly as a smaller agency. Multiple contracts with different departments also makes it difficult for county staff to refer clients to us, because of the varied eligibility criteria. Is this helpful to clients ultimately? There has been some discussion about unifying this. Regarding collection of specific data points, where the County contract is tied to Federal funds, it seems we are particularly limited in how we can describe our outcomes.

Respondents also sought consistency with respect to contract management guidelines and staffing. A fiscal manager in a large urban county recommended cross-division training to achieve standardized contract management practices between fiscal and program managers, as well as ensure continuity over time in the approach to supporting contractual relationships:

*My thought would be to train contract, fiscal, and program people together—and create consistency in terms of approach and handling of our contractor partners.*

*We need to know each other and be a team—across the Agency, across departments . . . [The] benefit of having a solid team/community of agency staff means that there's a built-in succession plan, so when staff retired, other staff carry on in the same manner and spirit of the work—maintaining and supporting contractual relationships in the same, positive manner.*

An executive in a nonprofit community health center similarly highlighted the need for consistent staffing in order to ensure communication is complete and clear: “More consistency in terms of the personnel with whom we interface, and ensuring that the HSA team is all on the same page. Sometimes there seem to be gaps in information and/or communication among HSA staff that can result in confusion for us as a contractor.”

### **Timeliness**

County and nonprofit managers reported numerous challenges related to ensuring the timeliness of communications. As one nonprofit executive at a large multiservice agency reported: “We have had ongoing difficulties agreeing on performance outcomes. Ultimately, we reached agreement, but it was difficult to get the right HSA people in the room in a timely manner to resolve this.” For some nonprofit managers, including an executive in a nonprofit agency providing mental health, housing and senior services, expectations regarding the timing of responses to communication requests were seen as reflecting the power balance in their relationship with the county agency: “Overall, we often experience a quick response required when HSA reaches out to us; however, we often receive a slower response when we reach out to HSA. [I] would like to see this become more of a balanced relationship, as we both need each other to achieve community goals.”

Among public managers, the most common concern about timeliness related to receiving reports from contracted service providers within the time frame specified in the contract. A program manager in a large suburban county who identified challenges with timely reporting highlighted the capacity challenges faced by smaller agencies: “Most challenging issue equals getting reports in a timely manner. Some contractors are very small and do not have enough staff to provide the reports needed on a consistent basis. I ‘nudge’ and remind contractors for reports needed.” Conversely, a program manager in a large urban county agency highlighted the value of providing prompt performance feedback back to contractors: “Increase frequency of monitoring activities to be able to determine service efficiency and/or provide timely feedback to contractors on their performance.” An executive of a large nonprofit multiservice agency similarly noted the

importance of timely and consistent performance feedback as part of the reporting process:

*[I]n some cases, we work hard to prepare quarterly reports but we never receive any feedback. We have asked for feedback, but we still do not receive it. There does not seem to be a formal process in place to make sure that the CBOs receive timely and consistent feedback on their performance outcomes. This is not the case for all contracts. Like I said, some of the contracts are well managed, with good feedback, and the data is collected and then evaluated.*

## Discussion

Study results reveal that county and nonprofit managers similarly highlight the importance of managerial communication in facilitating complex contracts for the delivery of human services. The results build on previous studies that have identified an association between managerial communication and the strength of contracting relationships (Amirkhanyan et al., 2010; Amirkhanyan et al., 2012; Vosselman, 2016). Respondents noted the value of regular, face-to-face, two-way communications in building close relationships characterized by trust and mutual understanding. Conversely, strong cross-sector relationships provide an environment that facilitates effective contract communications. These findings provide evidence of the role that direct interpersonal communication can play in supporting a stewardship or relational approach to contracting (Van Slyke, 2007).

In the current study, the emphasis on regular and face-to-face communications serves as an indicator of the importance of the intensity of relational contacting, and expands upon previous studies with respect to the association between relationship duration and relationship quality. Scholars have emphasized the contribution of repeated interactions occurring over time to the development of trust (Bertelli & Smith, 2009; Brown et al., 2015), while some research has found that the efficacy of informal exchanges regarding performance diminishes in longer term contractual relationships (Marvel & Marvel, 2009). Based on the findings of this study, the quality of the contract relationship is linked to the quality of communications in terms of transparency, flexibility, consistency, and timeliness, as well as frequency of interaction.

From the perspective of public and nonprofit human service managers, contract communications are not limited to the formal exchanges required to negotiate contract terms and report contract outcomes; rather, respondents described formal and informal conversations about wide-ranging topics that include identifying needs and goals; developing the RFP; negotiating contract terms; coordinating service delivery; reporting on performance; and solving problems. This array of topics can be classified

as: (1) contract-based communications that are procedural; (2) client-focused communications that relate to service delivery; and (3) collegial communications that reflect consultation activities. These three content domains make it clear that managerial communication in cross-sector contracting in the human services is embedded in relationships that extend beyond the boundaries of the formal contractual relationship (Bertelli & Smith, 2009; Lamothe & Lamothe, 2012; Romzek & Johnston, 2005; Van Slyke, 2007). Procedural communications related to negotiating contract terms and reporting contract outcomes establish a basic framework for service delivery. However, managers also engage in continuing client-focused service delivery communications that are essential to managing client referrals in an environment characterized by multiple, overlapping eligibility criteria and to serving diverse clients with varying levels and types of need. Consulting communications to address higher level challenges was identified by numerous respondents, including the relationship between changing community needs and designing feasible, relevant performance measures. This form of contract-related communications appeared to be less frequent than procedural or client-related communications.

County and nonprofit managers articulated common perspectives on the characteristics of effective communications with respect to the themes of transparency and timeliness. Nonprofit managers emphasized the role of transparency regarding funding priorities and decisions in fostering trust, as well as promoting a sense of equity. County and nonprofit managers alike valued candor and accuracy with respect to performance reporting and requirements, in order to facilitate informed decision making. In this respect, the findings reveal a common desire for information symmetry that may reflect the shared values and interests of county and nonprofit human service agencies when seeking to provide effective services to address community needs (Van Slyke, 2007). The desire for transparency is notable in light of the politically sensitive environments in which county and nonprofit human service agencies operate as they deliver services to vulnerable populations (Hasenfeld, 2010). The risk of catastrophic events involving child welfare or adult protective services clients, as well as continuing debates over the appropriate allocation of taxpayer dollars to an array of government functions, contribute to an environment where disclosure of errors and performance issues can result in serious negative consequences for county and nonprofit organizations (Regehr, Chau, Leslie, & Howe, 2002). Transparent communications may be especially important in developing and sustaining trust in the context of human services contracting given the inherent risks involved in serving vulnerable children and families and the heightened level of public scrutiny (Hasenfeld, 2010; Van Slyke, 2007).



In view of the resource limitations and practice complexities that characterize human services delivery systems and pose continuing challenges for contract management (Romzek & Johnston, 2002), it is not surprising that nonprofit and county managers prioritize timeliness in contract communications. Delays in contract communications throughout the contracting process increase transaction costs associated with contracting, impelling managers to engage in repeated efforts to obtain needed information, in order to avoid service interruptions or negative consequences from political stakeholders or regulatory bodies (Brown et al., 2006). While many respondents described relationships with their managerial counterparts that are characterized by collaborative problem-solving and mutual responsiveness, some nonprofit managers viewed differential expectations regarding communication timeliness as an indication of a broader power differential. As reported in studies of collaboration between government and nonprofit organizations, managerial perspectives on power and disadvantage are shaped by multiple organizational and individual level factors, including prior experience in collaborative relationships (Gazley, 2010b). These findings lend support to the notion that responsive communication may result on the part of nonprofit managers in more positive attitudes toward collaborative relationships with county managers.

The findings related to the importance of flexibility and consistency with respect to data systems, personnel, and procedures reflected a degree of variation between the sectors, with nonprofit managers somewhat more likely to emphasize the need for communication-based consistency as well as flexibility. In light of the power differential in the contracting relationship and the capacity issues more common among nonprofit organizations, we might expect that they would be impacted more strongly by inconsistent guidelines or inflexible demands involved in contracting communications (Thomson, 2011). In order to provide consistency with respect to contract expectations and procedures, county and nonprofit managers sought continuity of staffing, in line with previous research that noted the importance of stability among managerial counterparts across organizations (Romzek et al., 2012).

The continuing challenges posed by lack of standardization across multiple data reporting systems are consistent with previous studies finding that information technology can interfere with accountability in contracting, and indicate that technology barriers may persist even where government and nonprofit technological expertise is relatively high (Romzek & Johnston, 2005; Stuart, Graaf, Stein, Carnochan, & Austin, 2017). At the same time, respondents highlighted the need for flexibility regarding performance measures and time frames to account for variation in program design and evolving community contexts. As such, the findings portray a

more complex dynamic than is generally proposed in the relational contracting and public-private partnership literature, which tends to emphasize flexible approaches to cross-sectoral relationships in order to allow for ongoing adjustments and problem-solving in the delivery of complex services (DeHoog, 1990; Head & Alford, 2015). A managerial framework that incorporates and balances flexibility and consistency of systems and responses may be more appropriate in some human service contracting environments, particularly among well-established public and nonprofit agencies with a history of successful partnerships.

Several practice implications for county and nonprofit managers emerge from these findings. Consistent with conclusions drawn from previous studies, these findings indicate that managerial communications serve a particularly important function in regards to performance measurement and reporting (Campbell et al., 2012). While respondents noted challenges related to negotiating service objectives and outcomes, engaging in continuous conversations about common goals and related outcomes can facilitate cooperation to achieve shared aims. County managers may be able to enhance the benefits of performance measurement by structuring opportunities for face-to-face interactions throughout the process of contract design, implementation, and monitoring. In order to develop a bilateral approach to performance reporting, county managers should identify ways to provide more complete feedback to their contractors regarding performance data. By providing timely analysis and feedback, county managers could strengthen relationships with their nonprofit partners, and support evidence-informed decision making related to service delivery, as well as other aspects of contracting. County human service agencies typically possess in-house communications expertise that could enable them to support contract managers in framing easily accessible feedback to contracted nonprofit organizations.

More broadly, county managers will need to work toward creating a context that promotes trusting relationships in which transparent sharing of information by nonprofit managers does not bring immediate risk of sanctions. County managers can model transparency in their communications related to agency aims and funding priorities. Responses to inadequate performance by nonprofit service providers could be structured in phases where the foundation includes informal collaborative problem-solving and more formal modes of technical assistance and subsequent phases could include communications about more punitive consequences (e.g., financial sanctions for misconduct or fraud). The demands for consistency and timeliness relate to both organizational and individual capacities. Strategies that organizational leaders might use to support effective and efficient service delivery include providing specialized

training to individual contract managers, structuring opportunities to review and reduce contract management caseloads, and instituting mechanisms for minimizing staff turnover.

Contracts between county and nonprofit human service agencies will continue to play a critical role in the delivery of human services to vulnerable members of local communities. These contracts present complex challenges with respect to ensuring accountability and coordinating services. Further research to build knowledge in support of county and nonprofit contract managers might include the following qualitative and quantitative questions:

1. What is the interrelationship between transparency, consistency, and timeliness in cross-sector contract communications in the human services?
2. What contract communications-related factors most contribute to decreases in information asymmetry and transaction costs related to contract monitoring and performance measurement?
3. Are there other moderating factors in relational contracting that both clarify common interests and increase trust?
4. How are these qualities of the interorganizational contracting relationships and communications similar or different in other public services involving complex contracts and high levels of uncertainty and risk?

In addition, intervention research is needed to investigate how relationships between nonprofit and county human service contract managers might be improved using strategies such as cross-sectoral or joint training, coaching, mentoring, and technical assistance. An important yet unexplored intervention research question is: How does the strength of the contractual relationship impact the outcomes of contracted human services? Finally, the prominence of ongoing client-focused service delivery communications points to the importance of pursuing studies that examine managerial efforts to manage referrals and coordinate responses to clients, so that human services contracting can achieve its broad goals of effective and efficient service delivery.

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