This article by Vicki Lens is informative, ground breaking, and affirmative in a relatively understudied area of public administration. This article can serve as a basis for other studies on the government’s administrative agencies’ functioning in its service to citizens. In my job as a Family Service Worker and Community Organizer, I was often besieged with complaints about the public welfare program. The clients often solicited my assistance with navigating the public welfare system, although I was able to supply them with information on how to deal with workers on a professional level, and where to go or call for a complaint, this was a constant reminder of how I had felt when I first had to solicit assistance from the public welfare program. Lens has done a remarkable job of analyzing the overall problem of lack of personalization in worker-client interaction in public welfare programs. She provides client interviews on how the workers’ treatment of clients is instrumental in whether a client chooses the option of an administrative hearing or not. I agree with the conclusions, and believe that Lens’ data is useful in improving the government’s administrative hearing process, especially in public welfare programs.

This article is about administrative hearings in the public welfare programs. The study investigated what motivates clients to appeal, and how they differ from the non-appealers. It explores the decision to appeal and the clients’ experiences at administrative hearings. This study of appealers and non-appealers concludes that hearings are an effective mechanism for accountability in welfare bureaucracies, because they correct agency error, reveal organizational
problems, and serve as a substitute for personalized attention lacking in worker-client interactions. The study also concludes that fair treatment bolsters confidence in the government, and citizens are more likely to comply and respect the law if authorities act in good faith and are courteous. Additionally, the study concludes welfare clients are not as powerless as they once were, and are learning how to challenge the system.

Lens is an associate professor of social work at Columbia University School of Social Work. She has worked as a Director of Investigations and Complaints at the Suffolk County Executive’s Office of Consumer Affairs, where she established the Suffolk County Public Advocacy Unit, which prosecuted businesses for civil fraud and protected the public from economic exploitation. She has also worked as an assistant attorney general for New York State. Lens is well known for her work as a public interest lawyer, where she brought several class action lawsuits on behalf of welfare recipients and homeless families that established a right to shelter and expanded entitlements to public assistance (Columbia University School of Social Work, 2009). She has advocated for some time now that public bureaucracies are often disadvantageous to the poor. Lens obviously represents the view that public bureaucracies need to implement processes and procedures that insure that the poor have a voice in government. She is interested in the connection between law, social work, and social policy (2009). Lens believes that public welfare clients are mostly female single parents, who are considered the most stigmatized and powerless of social groups.

Lens clearly tries to persuade the reader that the administrative hearing process in the public welfare programs are an effective mechanism for accountability in welfare bureaucracies, but there are specific changes that need to be implemented in order to insure clients feel the administrative hearing process is fair. She presents the case for improving worker-client
interactions in public welfare programs. Lens also presents the case that procedural fairness is more important to welfare clients than substantive fairness. She conveys that welfare offices are the least hospitable of all government offices. Lens also conveys that decisions to appeal are based on perceptions of how workers treat clients; clients react to powerlessness and stigma; and clients’ social networks.

I found Lens’ argument particularly persuasive, because of my prior experiences with the public welfare system, and my clients’ perceptions of the public welfare system. The study is very in line with several social theories, such as the theory of account model, and ground theory. I was initially disturbed by Lens’ suggestion that agencies deliberately set administrative hearings at the client’s disadvantage, but upon further reading, I realized that the environment and agency representation are not conducive for clients to experience a fair hearing. As a Community Organizer, I was disappointed to read that most appealers are unaware of the evidentiary rules that they will have to follow in administrative hearings. I also was disappointed that Lens’ study did not include more demographic differences, such as race, region, education, and gender of the appealers and non-appealers.

References
