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Occupational therapists as street-level bureaucrats: Understanding how policies shape both practice and engagement in occupation

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Introduction: As front-line service providers who often work in institutions regulated by governmental bodies, occupational therapists can be conceptualized as "street-level bureaucrats" who mediate between public policies and clients' everyday lives. According to Lipsky (1980/2010), street-level bureaucrats' use of discretion 'makes' policy in varied ways that can perpetuate, resist, or transform idealized ways of doing and being that official policies set forth for clients.

Objectives: By drawing on understandings gained through our current research on the arena of long-term unemployment, we discuss how conceptualizing occupational therapists as street-level bureaucrats can enhance critical reflexivity about occupational therapists' role in social transformation.

Method: Our two-sited, multi-year North American study aimed to understand the multi-layered situation of long-term unemployment by using diverse qualitative methods with three participant groups (15 organizational stakeholders, 18 front-line service providers, and 23 people who identified as being long-term unemployed). These methods illuminated how front-line service providers acted as street-level bureaucrats and revealed tensions related to idealized and realized services; the ways in which policies set the stage for services; and the implications of discretionary practices for service providers and clients.

Practice Implications: This presentation illustrates how the notion of "street-level bureaucrats" can highlight occupational therapists' negotiation of governmental and organizational policies, as well as how occupational therapists can create opportunities for resistance and transformation through discretion within health care and other systems.

Conclusion: The notion of street-level bureaucracy can help bolster occupational therapists' critical reflexivity about their situatedness and opportunities within political systems and structures.