

Transition Document to the New Administration

SOCIAL WORK REINVESTMENT: A NATIONAL AGENDA FOR THE PROFESSION OF SOCIAL WORK



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INTRODUCTION

The social work profession is at a critical juncture. With society's psychosocial needs rapidly rising and recruitment and retention decreasing in the profession, significant efforts must be taken to ensure an adequate social work workforce for the future. There is a moral imperative in our nation to take care of not only our at-risk and underserved populations, but to ensure that every person has the ability to live a healthy, productive life. Social work provides the answers to many of our most troubling questions and is the profession that has historically led the public effort to promote individual and societal well-being. However, the profession is currently facing significant challenges including competing policy priorities, fiscal constraints, unprecedented educational debt, comparatively insufficient salaries, increased administrative burdens, and unsupportive work environments which have made it difficult to keep pace with increasing client demand.

The Social Work Reinvestment Initiative is a groundbreaking effort to recruit and retain professional social workers to ensure that millions of citizens can continue to receive social work services for years to come. Composed of 56 state and local plans as well as federal legislation geared towards ensuring a robust social work workforce, the reinvestment initiative is a comprehensive approach to solving the problems facing families and communities nationwide. The cornerstone of the initiative is the Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act, first introduced in the 110th Congress. When enacted, this critical legislation will establish a Social Work Reinvestment Commission to provide a comprehensive analysis of current trends within the academic and professional social work communities. Specifically, the Commission will develop long-term recommendations and strategies to maximize the ability of America's social workers to serve their clients with expertise and care.

“We hold in our hands the power to shape not only our own but the nation’s future.”

–Dr. Dorothy I. Height

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure an adequate supply of social workers

The services provided by social workers have become more necessary, but there is evidence that the current and projected supply of professional social workers will not keep pace with demand. The Bureau of Labor Statistics states that employment of social workers is expected to increase much faster than average for all occupations through 2016. In particular, the areas of aging, child welfare, mental and behavioral health, military and veterans’ issues, health, education, and corrections will see a rapid increase in the need for professional social work services in the near future.

Recruitment and retention of social workers must be a focus of the federal and state governments, schools of social work, and employers of social workers, if the profession is to remain able to care for the millions of Americans who will require services.

Reduce educational debt for social workers

The profession should be attainable for the best and brightest, but due to extraordinary educational debt, this is no longer so. While we have been pleased with the passage of loan forgiveness programs that include certain groups of social workers, more programs that focus on the social work

profession are needed. Social work students, graduating with their master's degree from a public university can expect to accumulate over \$25,000 in educational debt. The U.S. Public Interest Research Group states that as many as 37 percent of public 4-year graduates have too much debt to manage as a starting social worker. This makes a social work degree an impossible choice for many students

Enhance social work salaries

Professional social workers must earn livable salaries so that they may continue to provide needed services to clients. In addition to balancing significant educational debt, social workers can expect to earn salaries that are incomparable to other public health and mental health professionals. According to the NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 60 percent of full-time social workers earn between \$35,000 and \$59,000 per year with 25 percent earning between \$40,000 and \$49,999 per year. Social workers who earn lower salaries are more likely to work in challenging agency environments and to serve more vulnerable clients. They are also more likely to leave the profession. This profession is personally fulfilling to many and this is often used as an excuse, but due to high loan debt and low income, many social workers struggle financially.

Assure safety for social workers

Retention of experienced social workers is a serious concern. Social workers are leaving the profession due to serious safety concerns which can be prevented. According to the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, 70 percent of case workers report that front line staff in their agency had been victims of violence or had received threats of violence. Social workers are considerably safer when measures such as a global positioning systems, self-defense training, and conflict prevention are implemented.

Fund social work research

Social work research benefits consumers, policymakers, practitioners, educators, and the general public. Social work research informs practice and finds the solutions to some of society's most pressing problems. As federal and local governments investigate new ways to solve these critical social problems, they do so without adequate access to the knowledge and experience gained by social workers. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) devotes less than one percent of its research budget to social work research.

Increase education and training of social workers in child welfare

Education and training of social workers is a critical reinvestment component. The Administration and Congress must explore new ways to provide additional, and flexible, child welfare staff training funds. This includes legislation or regulatory changes to the Title IV-B and Title IV-E training fund programs.

Address inequities in the Medicare funding formula

The current Medicare Part B program payment formula is universally recognized as inadequate and politically untenable. Flaws in the Part B formula have produced several cuts for clinical social worker services in 2007 that were so severe that Congress enacted a provision in 2008 to temporarily halt further implementation of the cuts for psychology diagnosis and treatment services. The Administration and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services must include provisions to fairly compensate psychotherapy diagnosis and treatment services and end the discriminatory components of the formula that have so disproportionately reduced these particular clinical social work services.

THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, with particular attention to those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. Social work is the systematic application of a body of knowledge, largely from the social, psychological, and biological sciences, together with a refined set of specific skills grounded in a clear set of values. This unique combination is used to help individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities cope effectively with their reality as well as change that reality when necessary. Social work has built a reputation as the helping profession for over a century and has made significant contributions to the strength and vitality of our nation's people and communities during that period.

One important aspect of the social work profession, and probably the best known and understood, is that of a social safety net. Social workers perform services that help people experiencing homelessness, poverty, addiction, violence, and mental and behavioral health crises. Social workers have long been the professionals who guide people to critical resources, counsel them on important life decisions, and help them reach their full potential.

The social safety net has grown to include and protect a diverse group of people of all ages. In addition to the traditional roles of child welfare and poverty alleviation, social work has become vital to older persons who need long term care, persons struggling with addictions, and communities that are devastated by natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and violent tragedies. Social workers direct agencies, foundations, corporations, colleges, and communities. They serve in the military, state legislatures, and most branches of government. They work in hospitals, hospices, nursing homes, child welfare agencies, adoption agencies, prisons, schools, recovery clinics, in-patient psychiatric facilities, non-governmental organizations, and private mental health practice. Many social workers hold joint degrees in areas such as law, public health, pharmacy, nursing, and divinity.

SOCIAL WORKERS ARE EMPLOYED IN DIVERSE SETTINGS.

Social workers have advanced education, training, and preparation for their work. In order to claim the title of “social worker,” an individual must have a bachelor’s (BSW), master’s (MSW), or doctoral (PhD or DSW) degree in social work. Social workers have the right education, experience, and understanding of complex human needs to not only provide direct social services, but also to lead social service agencies, work on policy making at the state and federal level, and participate in leading edge social work research that informs practice. While other groups such as allied professionals, human service workers, and social service assistants provide much needed service and support, professional social work requires a specific skill set and knowledge base.

The items below highlight some important areas where social workers help.

Largest group of mental health providers

Over 26 percent of Americans aged 18 and older (one in four adults) experience a diagnosable mental health disorder. Additionally, one in five children and adolescents experience a mental health disorder. At least one in ten, or about 6,000,000 young people have a serious emotional disturbance.

According to U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2002), social workers are the largest mental health providers in the country with clinically trained professionals working with those with emotional disturbances or serious mental illness. There are more clinically trained social workers than clinically trained members of psychology, psychiatry and psychiatric nursing combined. Social workers are often the only providers of mental health services in rural areas.

Addressing the needs of older adults

Approximately one in seven adults over the age of 70 has some form of dementia. Social workers in gerontology settings work with older adults, including those with dementia, to support their physiological, psychological, and social needs through mental health therapy, caregiver and family counseling, health education, program coordination, and case management.

Finding permanent homes for children

Every 35 seconds a child is confirmed as abused or neglected, and over 513,000 children were in the U.S. foster care system in 2005. Most children in foster care are placed due to parental abuse or neglect. Research shows that professional social workers in child welfare agencies are more likely to find permanent homes for children who were in foster care for two or more years, however, fewer than 40 percent of child welfare workers are professional social workers.

Serving America's veterans

Social workers provide mental health treatment, case management, and crisis intervention to the nation's military and veterans. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that there are 23,977,000 veterans in the United States and approximately 1,100,000 active duty soldiers have been deployed since 2001. A once declining veteran's population is now increasing and is in additional need of mental health treatment to address issues such as post traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, depression, drug and alcohol addiction, domestic violence, and suicide.

Addressing the needs of people with chronic illness

Health care and medical social workers treat clients with chronic and long term illness including cancer, and HIV and AIDS. In 2006 alone, the American Cancer Society reports that there were 1,399,790 new cases of cancer. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that at the end of 2003, there were 1,039,000 to 1,285,000 people living with HIV or AIDS in the United States. Social workers provide outreach for prevention,

help individuals and families adapt to their circumstances, provide grief counseling and act as a liaison between individuals and their medical team, helping patients make informed decisions about their care.

Preventing high school dropout

Social workers counsel high school students who are at risk of dropping out. With a current dropout rate of 9.4 percent nationwide, and in many vulnerable communities reaching over 50 percent, school social workers have the skills necessary to identify, prevent, and intervene with at-risk students.

Creating positive offender reentry

According to the United States Department of Justice, every year more than 650,000 ex-offenders are released from federal and state prisons. Social workers employed in the corrections system address disproportionate minority incarceration rates, provide treatment for mental health problems and drug and alcohol addiction, and work within, as well as outside of, the prison to reduce recidivism and increase positive community reentry.

CONCLUSION

The United States is experiencing unprecedented human, social service, and health care requirements which transcend social and economic strata. These trends are taking place at a time when equally complex challenges and demands are being placed on our nation's social workers. Professional social workers ensure full participation of all members of society by assisting individuals, families, and communities to combat a range of social problems that limit our nation's health and potential.

The incoming Administration must not only recognize the current professional social work shortages and lack of incentives to attract and retain social workers, but actively support the Social Work Reinvestment Initiative to ensure a sufficient social work workforce so that millions of citizens across the nation can continue to receive necessary social services.

The Action Network for Social Work Education and Research (ANSWER) is a coalition of the following organizations:

Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors (BPD)

Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)

Group for the Advancement of Social Work Education (GADE)

Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (IASWR)

National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work (NADD)

National Association of Social Workers (NASW)

Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR)

The ANSWER Coalition's mission is to increase legislative and executive branch advocacy on behalf of social work education, training, and research. This goal is accomplished through collaboration among social work education, research, and practice organizations, social work education programs, and other stakeholders. The ANSWER Coalition serves as the steering committee for the Social Work Reinvestment Initiative.



Action Network for Social Work
Education and Research