

SOCIAL WORK REINVESTMENT

Position Statement

NASW, Iowa Chapter, believes that social workers play a central role in the delivery of services necessary for the support and well being of individuals, children, and families in Iowa. NASW affirms the use of public resources to support the recruitment and retention of a professionally educated, highly skilled, diverse, and well paid workforce.

Discussion

- *Workforce issues*

Social workers play a key role in the delivery of mental health services in Iowa, yet they are part of an aging workforce. A report by the Iowa Department of Public Health (Kelly, 2006) notes that a significant number of experienced mental health practitioners will reach retirement age in the next ten years, leaving the state at risk of being unable to meet the demand for mental health services. The report notes “those professions servicing the mental health needs of Iowans exhibited the highest combined percentage of licensees age 55 and older” (p.2). Among licensed social workers, 28% are age 55 or older (p.16). The shortage of mental health professionals is evident already in certain rural areas, notably the northeast quadrant and the southern two tiers of counties.

As the state’s population ages, there is a growing need for skilled geriatric social workers to address the specialized needs of Iowa’s seniors, especially in rural areas. Currently, 14.7% of the population is age 65 and older; by 2030, census data projects that 22.4%, nearly 1 in 4 Iowans, will be 65 or over (Iowa Data Center, 2006d). Among this group, 36% experience at least one form of sensory, physical, mental or care-related impairment. The National Resource Center for Rural Elderly (2006) reports that rural areas typically have a greater proportion of elderly residents, and such persons are more likely to be poorer and less healthy than those persons living in non-rural areas. Additionally, a national study conducted on behalf of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (Whitaker, Weismiller & Clark, 2006) reported a number of workforce issues related to providing service in rural areas – high caseloads, low salaries, difficulty filling staff vacancies and the tendency for agencies to hire non-social workers who lack professional training to fill social work positions. As a rural state with a disproportionately large number of older residents and relatively few professionally trained geriatric social workers, Iowa faces many of these service challenges.

Iowa’s population is becoming more diverse. While 94% of the population is white (Iowa Data Center, 2006b), the number of nonwhites living in Iowa has increased in the past decade and is projected to grow in the years ahead. Census estimates project that by 2030, Latinos will represent 9.8% of the population, and African Americans will make up 3.5% (Iowa Data Center, 2006c & 2006e). Key counties in the state -- Buena Vista, Marshall, Muscatine, Louisa, Black Hawk, Polk, Johnson, Linn and Scott -- are home to sizeable Latino, African American, and Asian American communities. Correspondingly, more languages besides English are commonly spoken in Iowa, including Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Laotian, Korean and several African dialects (Iowa Data Center, 2005b). By contrast, only 3% of social work licensees are nonwhite (Kelly, 2006), and overall, relatively few are bilingual. In this changing context, the profession needs social workers who reflect the demographic and linguistic diversity of the population they serve, and who are knowledgeable and skillful in delivering culturally appropriate services.

- *Cost of higher education*

Higher education costs have increased substantially in the past two decades, while the availability of financial assistance has fallen. Between 1999 and 2005, undergraduate tuition at Iowa’s four-year public universities rose by 80.0%, from \$2,988 to \$5,396 (Midwest Higher Education Compact, May 2005, p.2). This is the highest percentage increase among the surrounding 12 Midwest states. The cost translates into a sizeable increase in the ‘family share’ of higher education operating revenues. Between 1994-2004, Iowa’s ‘family share’ of revenues rose from 34% to 47%, while the national average rose by only 5% (Midwest Higher Education Compact, December 2005, p.34). In past years, financial assistance, particularly scholarships and grants, was readily available; today it is far more limited. Students fund their education from a mix of family assistance, personal savings, employment income, and sizeable education loans taken against future

earnings. And where human service agencies once offered tuition assistance, textbook reimbursements, and/or practicum stipends, today almost no agency assistance is available. For some, the costs have made higher education unreachable.

- *Comparable pay issues*

Social work incomes fall at the lower end of the pay scale when compared to other bachelor- and master-related professions. According to a survey of Iowa social workers conducted on behalf of the NASW – Iowa Chapter (Abendroth, 2005), the mean salary for a bachelor's-level social worker with less than 4 years of experience was \$22,828. By comparison, in 2005 the average salary for elementary and secondary school teachers with bachelor's degrees was above \$35,000 (Iowa Workforce Development, n.d.). For registered nurses having post-secondary education but less than a bachelor's degree, the average hourly wage in 2005 was \$21.42, equivalent to an annual salary of \$42,840 (Iowa Workforce Development, n.d.). Data from the NASW survey revealed that the mean salary for master's-level social workers with less than 4 years of experience was \$30,381 (Abendroth, 2005). By contrast, in 2004, the average base salary for master's-level nurses was \$49,700 (Allied Physicians, n.d.). Frustrated with the pay scale, some entry-level social workers have moved to other occupations, including pumping gas. Given the cost of living, the frequent need to repay educational loans, the long work hours, the high caseloads and job stress, a low salary serves as a significant disincentive to many wishing to enter or remain in the social work profession.

The low pay is related to another troubling dynamic. In recent years, the state has moved to privatize human services as a cost-saving strategy. Rather than funding relatively well-paying state level social work positions to deliver services, it has contracted those services to private agencies where salaries are markedly lower, often by as much as a third. The result is that the burden of the state's cost saving falls directly on the individual worker who performs the same work but for a much lower level of reimbursement, and on the clients who are faced with fewer services. Consequently, many young undergraduate professionals are prompted either to leave the profession entirely or to bypass traditional social service work and pursue graduate studies, with the goal of eventually entering private practice and thereby securing a reasonable income. The built-in economic incentives both devalue traditional social work practice, and drive competent professionals into other practice arenas.

Some progress was made during the 2007 legislative session when the Department of Human Services (DHS) received an appropriation of \$150,000 to provide tuition assistance to staff who take courses through the University of Iowa graduate social work program (personal communication, November 5, 2007). DHS requested the funds following an internal staff survey in which 84% of the 418 respondents indicated strong interest in taking master's level classes if tuition assistance could be provided, and 87% indicated an interest in ultimately pursuing an MSW degree.

Recommendations

- Forgive educational loans for individuals who make a commitment to work in underserved geographic areas or designated fields of practice.
- Expand state funding to support the education of DHS social workers.
- Provide educational funds to recruit and educate social workers from minority communities.
- Provide funding for cross-cultural, bilingual and geriatric education and training of social workers.
- Ensure that funding of human service programs is linked to salaries that provide a living wage and are commensurate with a worker's credentials, experience, skills and caseload.

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