

Hearing before the COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities

U.S. House of Representatives

ONE HUNDRED ELEVENTH CONGRESS

Chairwoman McCarthy, Ranking member Platts, and honorable members of the Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities, I would like to thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the state of the profession of social work. My name is Gary Bailey and I am currently an associate professor at Simmons College of Social Work in Boston, Massachusetts. Established in 1904, Simmons was the nation's first institute of higher learning to offer training for clinical social workers. Simmons also was at the forefront of educating students for medical social work and managed care.

I feel fortunate to have been a professional social worker for the past 30 years having worked in many capacities including the fields of child welfare, gerontology and social work education. I served as President of the National Association of Social Workers from 2003 to 2005 and am the current Chairman of the National Social Work Public Education Campaign.

Background

I join you today to discuss the important role that the profession of social work plays in our society. Social work is *the* helping profession. Across the nation the profession of social work and social workers improve and enrich lives every single day. Social workers provide critical services in rural, urban and suburban areas and have long been society's safety net for a broad range of issues including child welfare, mental and behavioral health, aging, corrections, health and military and veterans' affairs.

As the baby boomers continue to age, they will increasingly need social work services ranging from mental health and family counseling to health education, group programs and case management. Social workers, who provide the majority of mental health services in the United States, will work with the 26 percent of the American population aged 18 and older that experience a diagnosable mental disorder. Professional social workers will counsel students to prevent high dropout rates, work with formerly incarcerated individuals to ensure positive community reentry, and help patients diagnosed with serious illness to make informed decisions about their care.

Social work began in the late 19th century when concerns about increasing poverty led people to question how to prevent and protect people from "falling through the cracks" in society. Many credit Jane Addams for the emergence of the profession as she created the first settlement house in America, Chicago's Hull House in 1889. Settlement workers were often women who settled in urban areas to address the various challenges facing immigrant communities. The settlements

provided a vital service, Addams believed, both for the volunteer residents, who needed a purpose in life, and for the society at large, by building needed bridges between the classes in an increasingly stratified and fragmented society (Addams, 1893). Settlement house workers, charity organization societies, and child savers worked together throughout the end of the century to preserve healthy communities and ensure that biopsychosocial needs were being met.

During the Great Depression, economic, mental, and social needs rose dramatically and the social work profession was recognized as necessary to solve the seemingly intractable challenges of the times. Social workers created programs for the Department of Labor and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to combat widespread hunger and unemployment. The profession was dedicated to restoring hope for the American people and continued to see significant growth during the Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty as many of the architects of these important social initiatives were social workers. Recent decades have produced competition for financial resources and less understanding of the role of the social worker in society; however these professionals continue to help individuals, families, and communities across the country. The need for social work services will only grow with time.

Current Issues

The profession of social work has grown with and reflected the changing needs of our society. As previously mentioned, social workers are the largest group of mental health providers in the country. There are 192,000 clinical social workers across the United States treating adults, adolescents, children, veterans, the incarcerated, the elderly, and those diagnosed with diseases such as HIV/AIDS for a variety of mental health concerns ranging from emotional disturbances to serious debilitating illnesses. Social workers' most frequent specialty practice area is mental health whether it be in private practice, a mental health clinic, hospital, prison, or long term care facility.

Social workers not only practice in a variety of settings including child welfare and foster care agencies, community action centers, hospitals, government offices, mental health centers, homeless shelters, and schools but also cater to a diverse clientele. Social workers help people and communities overcome some of life's most difficult challenges including poverty, discrimination, abuse, addiction, physical illness, divorce, loss, unemployment, educational problems, disability, and mental illness.

Professional social workers have advanced educational preparation and practice experience. A professional social worker must have a bachelor's (BSW), master's (MSW) or doctorate (PhD or DSW) degree in social work. A master's degree in social work is the predominant degree for licensed social workers (79% for active practitioners) and we pride ourselves in being the profession trained to work with people in their environment, looking at all dimensions of the individual's life. Social workers recognize that most clients face complex situations and often have co-occurring needs and work to address all of these needs. For instance, a social worker

specializing in aging would not only support their client's physiological, psychological, and social needs through mental health therapy, caregiver and family counseling, and health education but will also need to understand chronic illness as many elderly clients will be faced with these issues.

Social workers undergo advanced training in accredited education programs and grow their expertise through standards, credentials, and state licensing requirements. Social workers have the right education, experience, and dedication to help people help themselves whenever and wherever they need it. They understand complex support systems and work to connect people to the resources they need. Social workers focus on a person's strengths and help clients reach their full potential. It is this unique blend of training, education, and experience that equips professional social workers with the tools necessary to tackle society's most pressing problems.

Challenges

Despite a century of service, the public is still not clear about what social workers do. The media often report on the profession only when a problem arises in the child welfare system and far too often these individuals are not professionally trained social workers as less than 35% of child welfare workers actually have any social work training. They may be performing in a social work capacity or hold a social work title without proper supervision or education. Despite some public perception, the vital services that social workers do provide in the child welfare system, as well as in numerous other areas, contribute to a healthy society.

There is confusion among the public as there is not one typical social worker. Social workers may work in traditional child welfare agencies or may hold public office as a member of Congress. They may own their own private mental health practice or work in a long term care facility. Few are aware that the largest employer of social workers in the nation is the Department of Veterans Affairs with over 5,000 professional social work employees. Uniformed social services play a critical role in our military efforts at home and abroad. It also often goes unnoticed that professional social workers are first responders to disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the Virginia Tech shootings. They provide vital supports to victims and their families during times of crisis and for years beyond.

Professional social workers hold positions in government, nonprofit, business and educational settings. Informing the public about the breadth and depth of the profession is important as it affects the public's access to care, the ability of social workers to perform essential duties, and to impact important policy decisions. Many of the benefits U.S. citizens take for granted were implemented because social workers --working with families and institutions -- spoke out against abuse and neglect.

During my tenure as Chair of the Social Work Public Education Campaign I have traveled the United States and met numbers of people who have a universal awareness of social work as a "helping" profession but who lack accurate knowledge related to the education and credentials

needed to be a professional social worker; they did not appreciate the diversity of the work; they were confused by the use of the more general term of “case worker” used interchangeably with that of social worker. Generally the public has had a strong respect for the difficulty of the job and believes that social workers are overworked and are under valued. They also believed that we worked with the underserved, handle a variety of problems and generally believe that they will never need a social worker.

The need for social work services will only increase with time, however we are not equipped to keep pace with this demand. For example, there are currently 30,000 licensed social workers working in the field of aging; however the National Institute on Aging projects that 60,000 to 70,000 social workers will be needed by 2010. If schools of social work do not recruit young professionals and if we do not retain experienced social workers, the public will suffer from a lack of critical services. This is particularly true in the areas of aging and child welfare.

A key component of recruitment and retention of professional social workers is their ability to earn comparable salaries. Increases in social work salaries have not kept pace with other professions such as teaching and nursing. A survey conducted by the John A. Hartford Foundation, Inc. found that between 1992 and 1999 the annual rate of wage growth for degree-holding social workers was less than one percent. In addition, high educational debt is a concern of every graduating social work student. According to one study, 68 percent of individuals surveyed with a Master’s Degree in Social Work (MSW) graduated with an average debt of \$26,777. Many social workers will earn less than that upon graduation. Low salaries and high educational debt are making this profession an impossible choice for many.

These challenges must be overcome in order to ensure that the profession grows and thrives in the future and so that clients can continue to be served for years to come.

Conclusion

The social work profession has existed for over a century and has enriched many lives. Social work skills are broad and applicable in a variety of settings and make this profession unique and important. Social workers are educated, experienced, and ethical and provide a diverse range of services across the life span.

Thirty years ago I made a decision to become a professional social worker. I was introduced to the field of social work by a woman who was teaching a winter intercession course at my alma mater of Tufts University. Until that time I was preparing to pursue a career in medicine. In her class I was introduced to a field that resonated with my desire to be a catalyst in people’s lives for change; and to create opportunities where previously there had been none.

I have never regretted that decision and I am delighted to say that my name is Gary Bailey and I am a proud professional social worker.