

**Hearing before the Committee on Education and Labor
Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities
United States House of Representatives
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Testimony of Michael Bird, MSW, MPH**

Chairwoman McCarthy, Ranking member Platts, and honorable members of the Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities, I am honored to be here today to discuss the state of the profession of social work. My name is Michael Bird and I feel fortunate to have worked in this profession for over 25 years in many capacities including medical social work, substance abuse prevention, health promotion, disease prevention, and health care administration. In addition to my professional training as a social worker, I also have a master's degree in public health and have found this combination of careers and professional experience to be extremely valuable in my practice. I was the first American Indian and the first social worker to serve as President of the American Public Health Association and have been an active member of APHA for over 18 years. I've also served as president of the New Mexico Public Health Association and was a fellow in the U.S. Public Health Service Primary Care Fellowship Program.

Background

I'm here today to not only discuss the important role that social work plays in our society but also the unique value placed on diversity in the social work profession. Social workers provide critical services to clients across the nation everyday. They work with a broad spectrum of clients including the homeless, the elderly, students at risk of dropping out of school, and the incarcerated from all racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Social workers have an ethical responsibility to pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and group of people. They also seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

The profession is unique in that social workers are expected to understand different cultures and the functions that those varying cultures play in everyday life situations. They believe that strengths can be found in every culture, and that building on those strengths is the best way to help clients reach their full potential. Specialized knowledge and understanding about the history, traditions, values, family systems, and artistic expressions of major client groups is a key component to the practice of social work as well as the use of appropriate methodological approaches, skills, and techniques that reflect the workers' understanding of the role of culture in the helping process. Through education, experience, and training, social workers strive to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression. The profession of social work values an understanding of differing political, religious, and ideological beliefs and social workers are expected to respect the dignity and worth of each individual they work with.

Social workers are not only expected to understand the role that social diversity plays on society but to also actively work to end any form of discrimination. Again, the clients that social workers work with are often vulnerable and oppressed and face prejudice and discrimination. In order to promote the welfare of each client, social workers recognize the importance that the environment plays in each situation. The profession utilizes a “person in environment” approaches that acknowledges the role that all social influences play on a person’s biopsychosocial needs.

Professional social workers support and advocate for recruitment, admissions and hiring, and retention efforts in social work programs and agencies to ensure diversity within the profession. They also seek to provide or advocate for the provision of information, referrals, and services in the language appropriate to the client.

My career as a social worker and my background in public health has led me to have a deep understanding of the diversity issues in this country. Having worked to address health disparities with American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian Communities as well as all ethnic minority communities for over twenty five years has been a major area of my personal and professional body of work. This is a moral and spiritual issue and cries out to be addressed. It is also a wasting our most important natural resource, our human capital and nation's potential.

As early as the first U.S. Census in 1790, federal reports chronicled major differences in socioeconomic, political, and health conditions in the population. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975). Today we feel the effects of these disparities. For instance, in 2001 Native Americans were the group most likely to be uninsured (35% lacked health insurance) (Census Bureau/National Center for Health Statistics, 2001). This has far reaching effects, particularly for the children of Native Americans. In fact, the Indian Health Service spends \$1,914.00 per person for medical care which is lower than Medicare at \$5,915.00 and less than the United States spends on federal prisoners at \$3,803.00 (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Report titled "A Quiet Crisis" Federal Funding and Unmet Needs in Indian Country. July 2003).

Federal reports also identify Latino and African American populations as having the lowest per capita income in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). However, Taylor and Kalt (2005) argue that Native Americans on reservations have lower per capita incomes but are not included in many federal income studies.

These statistics are realistic, yet unacceptable and social workers are the professionals equipped with the tools and understanding to make a real difference in the lives of their clients.

Challenges

Although the profession of social work has a rich history of respecting and appreciating social diversity, it also has a historical tendency to attract Caucasian women to the field. According to one study by the National Association of Social Workers Center for Workforce Studies, “social

work, like most health care professions, is less ethnically diverse than the U.S. population.” Licensed social workers who responded to the survey were overwhelmingly White, non-Hispanic (86%) and are disproportionately likely to be women (81%). While white women have long led the profession of social work, the clients social workers serve often belong to a non-White minority group (51% or more). According to this study of licensed social workers, ten percent of social workers have caseloads that are predominantly Black/African American, and five percent handle caseloads that are predominantly Hispanic/Latino. Additionally, only 14 percent of social workers work in settings in which their caseloads are 75 percent or more female. Efforts have begun to recruit more men into the profession to ensure that the needs of all our clients are successfully being met.

Another concern is the aging of the profession. Not only do social workers serve the aging baby boomers, but there will be a significant need to recruit new social workers once experienced professionals begin to retire. Licensed social workers are significantly more likely to be in older age groups than the U.S. civilian labor force. A higher percentage of social workers are ages 45 to 54 (33% compared with 23%), ages 55 to 64 (24% compared with 11%) and 65 and older (5% compared with 3%).

While women have done an exceptional job of forming the important tenets of the profession, building a strong foundation of social service, and strengthening individuals, families, and communities, we must look to the future and that involves reevaluating our recruitment and retention techniques. While a deep understanding of culture is intrinsic to every social worker, there is great value in reflecting the populations we serve. When every voice is present at the table, more informed decisions can be made and the community can be more fully served. Not only does everyone deserve the right to service, but they also deserve the right to be served by a social worker that makes them comfortable and can best understand and work to address their various social needs. More social workers of color must be recruited into the profession to ensure that clients can continue to have exceptional, culturally competent service.

Conclusion

When I reflect upon my career in social work and public health I believe that what attracted me to this area was the simple desire to help others who might be confronted by something bigger than themselves. As a child, I felt that I had no control over my situation at home in growing up with an alcoholic father. This experience instilled in me a desire to help people gain some control in their lives. I also wanted to give them hope and a sense of direction. I also thought that only Indians had these types of problems. As I grew wiser, I came to understand that we all have problems, just different kinds of problems, and that we all need help now and again. Social workers made a critical difference in my life as they do in the lives of people every day.

Social work and public health have always been guided by values of equity, diversity and social justice and these values should be guiding values for us all.