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## **The Growing Need for Social Workers in the Field of Poverty**

“While the social service needs are dramatically rising, the ability to meet those needs is getting tighter”.

Good Afternoon, my name is Sarah Wells, I hold a BSW from East Tennessee State University, I am Certified Social Work Manager, a minister with the United Methodist Church, and I work for Good Samaritan Ministries in Johnson City Tennessee.

Last Monday I arrived to work to find that we had three consecutive families coming in with medical emergencies. All three had a parent with cancer, were facing death, and had to accept they were becoming homeless. The most urgent was a father, mother, and three children that were behind in rent and their utilities were in danger of being cut-off. The father had been diagnosed with stage four cancer, the wife had lost her job while missing work caring for her husband, and they had received an eviction notice. The children were very quiet and seemed to cling to their parents during the interview. Soon I had heard that they were three months behind in rent totaling \$1,200.00. The power bill was another \$289.00, there was very little food for the family, and medical bills were piling up. It was hard to believe that this family’s income last year was \$60,000.00 and now they had lost everything. Due to a recent acquired homeless prevention grant, I was able to pay the rent, utilities, and give them food. Then I began my task of helping the family find the community and government resources needed in the future days to come.

Social Workers throughout America face these tragic stories each and every day. They are trained to look at the “whole picture” and to assist individuals and families to form positive action plans. While the social service needs are dramatically rising, the ability to meet those needs is getting tighter. Many times finding the needed resources becomes difficult at its best, to an almost impossible task. By working for a ministry I normally would not have had the financial resources to help this family to the tune of

\$1,489.00, but due to the new grant opportunity that better allows our ministry to aid our community's homeless prevention assistance, they were assisted in-house. However, this just began the wide array of services that still had to be located to undergird the needs. It is absolutely necessary to have excellent knowledge of, and communication with all community and government agencies. It is the role of the social worker to pull all of these resources together to be able to offer the means to solutions. In the aforementioned case, this particular family was rescued from homelessness and having to move at such a delicate time, but many others are forced to leave the security of their sanctuary and all that is familiar to them. America's schools are now overwhelmed with the special needs of homeless and at-risk children. The elderly are now facing homelessness at a greater rate than ever before.

I would now like to tell you about another family: a mother that quit school at fourteen to marry and had to face divorce at age 28. She, like so many, had no idea how to support herself, or her two children. She got into her car with her children and drove from Tennessee until she ran out of money for gas in Florida. She had a tent for the family to stay in until she could find work and housing. She reminded her children that they were on "vacation" and that camping was fun. Each night after the children went to sleep she cried and held them tight. The mother admits to having more fear during that time than ever in her life. She was blessed with two part time jobs and a small apartment in which to live. Unfortunately, there was never enough money to pay the bills and each month the family faced eviction and termination of the utilities. They found themselves homeless nine times in ten years, and during one period they lived with no power for six weeks, without water for four, and knew no one to help. The mother had never asked for help in her life and was raised to be strong. Depression and thoughts of suicide were with her everyday, but because of her children, she had to go on. One day she walked into a social service ministry and met a wonderful gentleman. This was the first time she had ever heard the title "social worker". He listened as she cried and watched as she dumped all of her bills and receipts on his desk. After reviewing the items, he pulled out a checkbook. She cried out that she had not come to beg, but to be taught to budget. He said, "No money, no budget". He paid all her current bills and then set a budget. As the visits continued over the next few weeks, he helped her to see areas that she could receive help. Finally, he helped her enroll in school and she began her road to a new future.

If you have not guessed by now, I am that mother and those are my children. I am your homeless... the hopeless, but now one that knows success and hope for a lifetime. I was privileged to have a social worker that was educated, that cared, and listened to me. He did not feed me for a day, but taught me to fish. I completed my education with lots of help and I too, became a social worker and now even a minister.

I now give back by helping others as they overcome their journeys of pain. My past has made me more sensitive to the struggles of others, to have deeper wisdom, and to firmly believe in accountability. I have helped start 8 agencies that assist the poor, and I serve as the pastor of a United Methodist Church. Being able to work each day to lighten one person's load makes my past struggles worth it all.

Today, I see much greater needs than those in my time of homelessness. It is harder to find and to keep jobs these days not to mention the lack of safe, affordable housing. Utility and rent deposits are astronomical. Most of the low-income people cannot meet the needed payments to obtain housing. Waiting lists for affordable housing are as long as two years. If a person with no income gets into public housing, they are required to still pay a minimum of \$25.00. There is not enough transitional housing or shelters, with lengthy housing waiting lists. Many of the shelters do not allow mothers with boys over the age of twelve, nor single fathers with children to stay at all. Disability requests now take from 2-4 years for a decision and there is very little help for those waiting. The list goes on for obstacles to service and we face services being cut each day.

Struggles are not new to social workers; however many have some of their own. Working for a ministry is financially difficult. Most are paid very little, are provided no benefits, insurance, nor retirement. Fulfillment and dedication keep them serving and doing work for others. The role of the social worker is evolving to become even more intricate, however it remains the stronghold and bridge for those in need. Lives are guided by the "helping angels" serving in ministries, agencies, and government settings each day as they work to bring positive changes to our world. Solutions are not simple; however by working well together we will receive answers.

Respectfully Submitted,

Rev. Sarah C. Wells, BSW, CSWM