

CRITICAL CONVERSATION BRIEF



INFLUENCING SOCIAL POLICY: Positioning Social Work Graduates for Policy Careers

December 13, 2012

> FOCUS

Professional social workers have long pursued careers specifically focused on influencing social policy. These policy practice positions include working as lobbyists, policy and program analysts, organizers, and advocates. Such positions can be found within the executive and legislative branches of government, with provider and professional organizations, foundations, think tanks and public interest advocacy groups at the national, state and local levels. The current economic, social and political climates provide a ripe environment for promoting social work expertise in these positions. To meet this demand it is imperative that there be on-going dialogue between social work educators who prepare students for policy practice and policy practitioners, especially those who hire entry-level policy staff.

On December 13, 2012, the Social Work Policy Institute of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) convened a **Critical Conversation**, *Influencing Social Policy: Positioning Social Work Graduates for Policy Careers* in conjunction with the George Mason University Department of Social Work. The **Critical Conversation** brought together 35 thought leaders representing a range of policy organizations and policy roles along with social work faculty and

representatives from both NASW and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). Participants included both social workers and non-social workers who serve in key policy positions at the national, state and local levels, social work faculty, and recent social work graduates pursuing policy positions.

To stimulate the **Critical Conversation** a panel of three policy leaders described the policy work of their organizations, described their own career trajectories, provided their perspectives on what qualities social work graduates bring to the policy arena, identified the skills and knowledge they look for when they are hiring staff, and provided their perspectives on what social work students should be learning to ensure that they have the skills, knowledge and attributes to position themselves for professional roles in the policy arena.

This brief draws from the panel presentations and the ensuing discussion, highlighting key issues that were raised. It also provides recommendations that can serve as an action agenda to ensure that social workers are well-prepared to be successful and effective policy leaders.

> PERSPECTIVES FROM POLICY PRACTITIONERS

As executive director of the Arc of Virginia, **Jamie Liban**, MSW, suggested that it is important to carve out a practice niche during one's social work education in order to develop depth in a particular position or setting. She also believes that all social workers should have exposure to macro-practice. She noted that organizations such as the Arc that advocate for persons with developmental disabilities, rely on

WHAT IS POLICY PRACTICE?

In social work, policy practice encompasses the professional efforts to influence the development, enactment, implementation, modification, or assessment of social policies, primarily to ensure social justice and equal access to basic social goods.

(*Social Work Dictionary*, 5th Edition NASW Press, p. 330)

social workers working directly with consumers and families to motivate consumers and families to participate in the advocacy process. Liban stressed the impact of budgets on programs and service delivery and recommended that social work classes include more about understanding budgets and the budgeting process. She also recognized that social worker's communication skills are essential for policy and practice, and that communicating a message through visuals, such as the use of infographics, is also an important skill to have.

Linda Spears, Vice President for Policy and Public Affairs at the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) currently has four policy staff that she supervises, three of whom have an MSW degree. Spears discussed the difficulty of getting the right balance in one person – to both have the technical knowledge and skills for government relations and to also have substantive knowledge. Policy staff at CWLA work on federal advocacy, and also provide tools to states on critical issues. Tasks include issue identification, analysis, policy advocacy, policy evaluation and policy development. Spears also noted that social work education may create too much of a dichotomy between micro and macro practice, since policy impacts client outcomes, especially in child welfare; and to be an effective policy practitioner it is important to know what the impact of the policies might be at the client, family and organizational levels. Some of the difficulty of child welfare policy work is due to the multiple funding streams that are used in child welfare, the role of grant funding and the complexity of the budget process. Essential skills include strategy development, writing, communication, technology, use of social media, and persuasion.

Marco Villagrana, MSW, Associate Director of Federal Relations at The Joint Commission noted that there were only 3 or 4 students in the policy cohort out of 100 students in his MSW class and that the macro/micro divide can make macro students feel alienated. This can lead to social work policy practitioners not always identifying themselves as social workers. Some policy practitioners transition into macro practice after working in direct services, hoping that by focusing on policy change, they can improve the outcomes for persons like their direct practice clients. Villagrana noted that his government relations colleagues have diverse backgrounds including nursing and pharmacy, and that he is the only social worker. When taking interns, they tend to be in health or public policy, and not social work, perhaps because regular connections to the social work community are not maintained. Some of the attributes that differentiate social workers from other policy practitioners are their intellectual curiosity to dig deeper into an issue, their sense of ownership of an issue (due to social work's ethical and values base), their understanding due to the person-in-environment perspective, their self-awareness and communication skills.

KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED

Social Work Graduates' Strengths

- > Understand the context of social problems due to person-in-environment perspective.
- > Adhere to professional values & ethical commitment to serving vulnerable populations and advocacy.
- > Use communication, assessment, analytical and critical thinking skills to analyze and strategize policy improvements.
- > Use similar skills in advocacy & clinical practice – but apply them differentially (e.g., persuasion, use of power).
- > Bring clinical/front-line experiences to

the pursuit of policy improvement.

- > Learn about policy and about action strategies that can be used to influence social policy as part of the curricula.
- > Can have hands-on policy experience at the local, state or federal level through required field education.

Gaps in Social Work Education

- > Marginalization of policy practice, even within macro practice (focus is more on management, administration and community organizing).
- > Diversity of titles for macro practice concentrations suggests lack of clarity and consistency of macro content within curricula.
- > Difficulty in acquiring full set of skills to influence change, including understanding, analyzing and developing budgets; using social media, and creating effective infographics.
- > Bifurcation of micro & macro-practice.
- > Curricula focus on clinical information needed for licensing exams.
- > Policy classes taught by faculty who do not always understand policy practice.
- > Lack of organized engagement of policy practitioners as adjunct faculty, field instructors and guest speakers.
- > Student's field-based classroom assignments may not adequately target policy practice experiences and skill acquisition (focus is on individual and family client assessment and engagement).

Policy Practice Settings' Challenges

- > Absence of social work field instructors in policy settings.
- > Competition with Master's of Public Policy & Master's of Public Health graduates for policy positions.
- > Settings may have a lack of understanding/appreciation of special qualities that social work graduates bring to the position.
- > Challenge of finding a balance for individual policy practitioners between technical policy skills and substantive knowledge.

> TARGETING THE CONVERSATION

To begin to develop an Agenda for Action, participants broke into five work groups, each of which included a mix of social work educators and policy professionals. Each workgroup was guided by one of the following questions:

- > What strategies can be used to enhance connections and engagement between social work education programs and policy practitioners or policy/advocacy organizations?
- > What advantages do social work graduates have over other applicants for policy practice jobs and how can they best be articulated and demonstrated?
- > What are the most important things that prospective policy practitioners should be learning (a) in the classroom and (b) through their field education experiences?
- > Given the existing confines of social work curricula, how should we balance or prioritize the acquisition of (a) subject matter expertise, (b) practice knowledge and experience, and (c) policy skill development for those students hoping to pursue policy careers?
- > How can the social work community increase awareness among non-social workers of the profession's suitability for policy work? How can it attract more interested students? More potential employers?

> AN AGENDA FOR ACTION

Participants expressed a strong commitment to policy practice as a critical component of social work, highlighting their belief that advocacy is an indispensable aspect of practice and that knowledge of policy is essential to a social work identity. Concerns were raised, however, about the paucity of social work faculty with expertise in

policy practice, the role of licensing in driving students into clinical practice, and the marginalization of macro-focused students, faculty, and practitioners. There is no question that preparing graduates for practice in the policy arena should remain an important facet of social work's educational mission. Its importance is reinforced by the *NASW Code of Ethics* and the CSWE educational policy and accreditation standards. Policies made at all levels of government have a profound effect on service delivery and client well-being. As a profession, we have a responsibility not only to prepare our graduates for policy roles, but to ensure that their unique competencies are recognized and valued by the larger community.

Four key themes emerged from the discussions – Creating Linkages, Rethinking Curricula, Creating Classroom and Field Opportunities and Marketing Social Work Graduates.

CREATING LINKAGES

Strengthen Linkages between Social Work Education Programs and Advocacy Organizations.

Schools of social work should seek to establish partnerships with advocacy organizations in their communities. These arrangements have the potential to engender enormous benefits, providing opportunities for collaborative research, practice experience, and shared expertise. They can be instrumental in helping students understand that social workers have an important role to play in the policy process—and that their work can have profound and far-reaching effects in meeting client needs.

A database of social workers in policy positions at the state and local levels should be compiled and shared with schools of social work; this could facilitate faculty and students making one-on-one connections with policy practitioners.

Use Field Instructors to Connect to Policy Practice Opportunities.

Field instruction provides a particularly fertile opportunity to connect students and faculty with policy organizations. Field instructors can serve as links to the community, keeping students and faculty informed about timely advocacy opportunities and engaging student interest and participation.

Connect with Related Programs on Campus. Linkages should also be established with related programs on campus, including those in Public Policy.

Engage Students in Advocacy Activities.

Students should be kept informed of advocacy activities undertaken by their social work programs or universities on issues that affect them, including, for example, social work licensure and student financial aid. Faculty in every social work program should use their own involvement in macro-focused activities as an opportunity to engage students in these and similar efforts.

RETHINKING CURRICULA

Enhance Integration of Macro Content throughout the Foundation Year. All students, regardless of their concentration, must understand the role that policy plays in the lives of social work clients. This can best be accomplished by:

- > Ensuring that macro content is fully integrated into the foundation curriculum. Focusing on direct service—and “adding on” a single

macro assignment at the end of the semester—is inadequate.

- > Presenting students with a public health approach to social work was one recommendation; some programs have had success offering a course, for example, in Social Determinants of Health, which challenges students to recognize the interconnectedness of smaller and larger systems.
- > Reconceptualizing foundation year field placements, moving from an exclusive focus on direct service to integrating skills across the practice spectrum.
- > Addressing policy-making at the agency and community levels, not just at the level of state and federal government in the foundation curricula.

Enhance Acquisition of Marketable Policy Practice Skills in Macro Concentrations.

The priority for interested students during the concentration year should be on policy skill development. This should include:

- > Legislative analysis, advocacy, and policy implementation.
- > Training in the strategic use of media (including social media), manipulation of census data, creating infographics, GIS technology, and an understanding of public agency, nonprofit, local, state and federal budgeting, all of which are not consistently included in the curricula.

Focus on Assuring that Policy Graduates Acquire a Common Set of Skills.

Participants recommended that all social work students with a concentration in policy graduate with a common set of skills; this increased standardization would help insure competence, and would help prospective employers recognize the competencies that social work applicants bring to the table.

Acquire Subject Matter Expertise in Tandem with Policy Skills.

In addition to acquiring policy skills, students need practice knowledge and experience. The most marketable graduates are those who have enough depth of understanding to apply their policy expertise to the issues confronting a specific population or setting.

Revise Curricula to Enhance

Specialization. While it is imperative that students and faculty appreciate the interdependence of policy and practice, educational curricula should be revised to allow sufficient time for specialization. In smaller programs, macro concentrations may combine policy, community organizing, and administration – each of which is a distinct practice arena requiring differing knowledge and skills. This kind of configuration allows too little opportunity to develop the depth necessary for professional practice in a policy role.

CREATING CLASSROOM AND FIELD OPPORTUNITIES

Involve Students in the Policy Process.

Teaching faculty should prioritize strategies that involve students directly in the policy process. Examples include:

- > Analyzing and monitoring pending legislation.
- > Attending legislative hearings.
- > Visiting state or local legislative offices.
- > Partnering with advocacy organizations.

- > Participating in local coalitions.
- > Developing social media action alerts.
- > Briefing state or local policymakers on issues of importance to social work.

Highlight Policy Practitioners and Policy Practice in the Classroom.

In addition to engaging students in the policy process, faculty can:

- > Invite policy practitioners into the classroom.
- > Showcase social workers who hold policy positions.
- > Organize mock hearings or lobbying role plays.

Ensure that Faculty have Policy Practice Experience.

One of the major challenges social work programs face is a shortage of faculty with policy practice experience. Because policy is a competency required by CSWE, programs have an obligation to ensure that they have sufficient faculty to convey the required content. This may require hiring policy practitioners as adjunct instructors.

Increase the Integration of Macro and Micro Content in the Classroom and Field Placement.

Students in foundation year and in direct service or clinical concentrations should also receive instruction in policy practice. Increasing the integration of micro and macro practice will help students recognize the systemic issues associated with every area of practice. Clinical students, for example, should understand the macro issues associated with mental health, including how both governmental and agency policies impact the practice environment and access to services.

Develop Field Placements in Policy Settings.

Specific efforts should be made to develop field placements in policy settings, even if this requires the use of off-site field instructors who provide social work supervision. In

addition to benefitting current students, these placements could result in employment opportunities for social work graduates, magnifying the voice of social workers in the professional policy arena. Regardless of the setting:

- > Field instructors should find ways to help students connect policy in the field agency to their ability to deliver services and benefit clients.
- > Field liaisons should have an interest in (and understanding of) the connection between policy and direct practice.
- > Field education directors should partner with other schools of social work and with national social work organizations to formulate creative arrangements that allow interested students to complete their practica in state capitals or in Washington, D.C.

MARKETING SOCIAL WORK GRADUATES

Many programs struggle with attracting a critical mass of students to macro practice. Often, this is exacerbated by licensing laws that incentivize clinical practice. Students interested in policy careers need to have confidence that there will be jobs available when they graduate.

Ensure that Policy Employment Opportunities are Visible to Students.

A special effort should be made to track and advertise employment opportunities. Incoming students should know that there are opportunities both for graduates who move directly into macro practice, and for those who begin in direct service and later move into policy or administrative roles.

Highlight Strengths of Social Work Graduates who Seek Policy Practice Positions. Social work graduates who do seek employment in the policy arena may face competition from graduates in other disciplines, including public policy and political science.

Social work students, however, have distinct advantages. For example, social work graduates:

- > Are able to appreciate the actual impact of social policies on real clients.
- > Are educated to understand systems, including the social service system, and recognize the ways in which they can both enhance and impede client well-being.
- > Are instilled with a passion for social justice and are equipped with the skills to facilitate change.
- > Even as entry-level employees, come with experience under their belts, having completed two or more years of field practicum.

Unfortunately, these attributes are not universally known; many key potential employers—including some on Capitol Hill, in state legislatures, and in state and federal agencies—fail to understand the advantages that social work graduates bring. Many have stereotyped misconceptions of what social workers do. These misunderstandings may be shared by incoming social work students as well.

Ensure that Social Work Graduates are Competitive in the Marketplace.

In order to make our graduates competitive in the marketplace:

- > Schools of social work must keep current with emerging market trends and ensure that curricula reflect cutting-edge knowledge and skills.
- > Professional organizations and schools of social work must be able to clearly articulate what knowledge, skills, values, and competencies social work graduates bring to the policy domain.
- > Potential employers need to understand the versatility of a social work degree, and the depth of knowledge such a degree represents.

- > Faculty should help students identify the assets they have to offer and what they, as social workers, can contribute to the policy process.

Say You are a Social Worker. It is important that policy professionals with BSW or MSW degrees be encouraged to publicly identify as social workers and to connect to the profession through membership in NASW or other social work organizations. Those who identify with the profession are better positioned to educate their non-social work colleagues and to mentor incoming social work graduates.

Raise the Profile of Macro Practice.

To raise the profile of macro practice:

- > Social work's professional organizations should emphasize social work roles in policy in their news coverage and media campaigns.
- > Professional organizations and schools of social work should identify potential employers and market social work directly to them, using messages meant to resonate with different non-social work audiences.
- > Employers of policy practitioners should be encouraged to advertise their openings with NASW, schools of social work, and other social work outlets.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO POSITION SOCIAL WORK GRADUATES FOR POLICY CAREERS

The following recommendations were generated through this Critical Conversation. Each is important in ensuring that we are providing superior education and training in policy to social work students, making them marketable as graduates, and raising the profile of social workers in policy practice.

- > Create linkages between schools of social work and policy organizations.
- > Use field instructors to connect with agencies that engage in policy practice.
- > Ensure that field faculty emphasize policy issues facing the placement agency.
- > Create policy practice field placements.
- > Invite policy practitioners into the classroom.
- > Have faculty and students make presentations to state and local legislators.
- > Infuse policy content throughout the curriculum, in both foundation and concentration years.
- > Encourage social work faculty to become involved in policy practice, and to share their experiences with students.
- > Hire policy practitioners as social work instructors.
- > Ensure that students are developing the competencies that policy employers are seeking.
- > Organize ongoing, regional conversations among social work educators, practitioners and researchers, and between policy faculty and policy professionals.
- > Compile a database of social workers who are policy professionals and of potential policy employees.
- > Define a standardized set of practice behaviors in policy practice to guide social work curricula.
- > Produce a video or video series about policy practice that emphasizes the relationship between micro and macro practice; uses social work policy professionals to explain how policy practice contributes to client and community well-being; includes young professionals to whom students can relate; and tells stories about policy practice experiences.
- > Market social work policy practice to potential employers.
- > Encourage social work policy practitioners to identify with the profession.
- > Educate potential employers and the public at large about what social workers do.
- > Encourage social work students to enroll in dual or joint degree programs, including public policy.
- > Leverage scholarships and other funding resources as incentives for students to pursue policy concentrations.
- > Ask potential employers to advertise policy positions with NASW.

This Critical Conversation was co-chaired by Joan Levy Zlotnik, PhD, ACSW, Director of the Social Work Policy Institute and Sunny Harris Rome, JD, MSW, Professor, Department of Social Work at George Mason University.

For more information and a list of the participants please visit SocialWorkPolicy.org.

COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION EDUCATIONAL POLICY & ACCREDITATION STANDARDS (2008)
www.cswe.org/File.aspx?id=41861

Educational Policy 2.1.8—Engage in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being and to deliver effective social work services.

Social work practitioners understand that policy affects service delivery, and they actively engage in policy practice. Social workers know the history and current structures of social policies and services; the role of policy in service delivery; and the role of practice in policy development. Social workers

- analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance social well-being; and
- collaborate with colleagues and clients for effective policy action.

> NASW RESOURCES

> *Social Work Dictionary 5th Edition*

www.naswpress.org/publications/reference/dictionary.html

» *Policy Practice* (p. 330)

In social work, professional efforts to influence the development, enactment, implementation, modification, or assessment of social policies, primarily to ensure social justice and equal access to basic social goods.

> *NASW Lobby Day Toolkit*

www.socialworkers.org/advocacy/grassroots/lobbyday.pdf

» NASW provides a how-to handbook of putting together a lobby day. Many of the resources provide helpful hints in becoming an effective advocate.

> *NASW Leadership Ladders*

- » Outside the Lines: Maximizing the Flexibility of a Social Work Degree
- » Career Coaching: A Valuable Resource for Social Workers

> CODE OF ETHICS OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Approved by the 1996 NASW Delegate Assembly and revised by the 2008 NASW Delegate Assembly

www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp

Selected Exerpts

Preamble

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with

particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living.

Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients. "Clients" is used inclusively to refer to individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice. These activities may be in the form of direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation. Social workers seek to enhance the capacity of people to address their own needs. Social workers also seek to promote the responsiveness of organizations, communities, and other social institutions to individuals' needs and social problems.

The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of core values. These core values, embraced by social workers throughout the profession's history, are the foundation of social work's unique purpose and perspective:

- > service
- > social justice
- > dignity and worth of the person
- > importance of human relationships
- > integrity
- > competence.

This constellation of core values reflects what is unique to the social work profession. Core values, and the principles that flow from them, must be balanced within the context and complexity of the human experience.

6. Social Workers' Ethical Responsibility to the Broader Society

6.01 Social Welfare

Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments. Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice.

6.02 Public Participation

Social workers should facilitate informed participation by the public in shaping social policies and institutions.

6.03 Public Emergencies

Social workers should provide appropriate professional services in public emergencies to the greatest extent possible.

6.04 Social and Political Action

(a) Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal

access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully. Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice.

> SOCIAL WORK POLICY INSTITUTE RESOURCES

Policy Briefs

- > *Social Work in Health and Behavioral Health Care: Visioning the Future*
www.socialworkpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/CritConvBrief.pdf

- > *Educating Social Workers for Child Welfare Practice: The Status of Using Title IV-E Funding to Support BSW & MSW Education*
www.socialworkpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/SWPI-IVE-Policy-Brief.pdf
- > *High Caseloads: How do they Impact Delivery of Health and Human Services?*
www.socialworkpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/r2p-cw-caseload-swpi-1-10.pdf

Think Tank Reports

- > *Children at Risk: Optimizing Health in an Era of Reform*
www.socialworkpolicy.org/news-events/report-on-health-care-for-children-at-risk.html
- > *Supervision: The Safety Net for Front-Line Child Welfare Practice*
www.socialworkpolicy.org/news-events/supervision-the-safety-net-for-front-line-child-welfare-practice.html

- > *Investing in the Social Work Workforce*
www.socialworkpolicy.org/news-events/social-work-policy-institute-releases-new-report-on-needed-workforce-investments.html
- > *Hospice Social Work: Linking Policy, Practice, and Research*
www.socialworkpolicy.org/news-events/hospice-social-work-linking-policy-practice-and-research.html
- > *Social Work Research and Comparative Effectiveness Research (CER): A Research Symposium to Strengthen the Connection*
www.socialworkpolicy.org/news-events/social-work-research-and-comparative-effectiveness-research-cer-a-research-symposium-to-strengthen-the-connection.html



ABOUT THE SOCIAL WORK POLICY INSTITUTE

The **Social Work Policy Institute** was established in 2009 and is a division of the NASW Foundation. Its mission is:

- > To strengthen social work's voice in public policy deliberations.
- > To inform policy-makers through the collection and dissemination of information on social work effectiveness.
- > To create a forum to examine current and future issues in health care and social service delivery.

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