

Social Work Leadership and Aging: Meeting the Demographic Imperative

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In 2001, with support from the John A. Hartford Foundation, the Council on Social Work Education's Strengthening Aging and Gerontology Education for Social Work (CSWE/SAGE-SW) project published *A Blueprint for the New Millennium* aimed at "strengthening the impact of social work to improve the quality of life for older adults and their families" (CSWE/SAGE-SW, 2001, p.1). Taking note of what it called the "demographic imperative"—meaning the combined effects of the aging of the baby boom generation, the increasing median age of the national population, and "extended longevity" from technological, medical, and lifestyle factors—the authors argued that there will be increased demand for social workers. In particular, social workers' "comprehensive," biopsychosocial approach to meeting human needs make them well equipped to provide "services for older Americans and their families" (p. v).

Despite this potential, the profession continues to face serious challenges. According to the National Institute on Aging, by 2020 the United States will require 70,000 professional social workers with expertise in aging, which translates into a 43 percent increase over the current social work labor force (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1987). A recent survey of 10,000 licensed social workers by NASW's Center for Workforce Studies (NASW, 2005) found that almost one-third of social workers are age 55 and older (with only 17 percent younger than 35), and 13 percent said they "plan to leave their current positions in the next two years." In addition, only 9 percent of social workers identified aging as their practice area, and the median age of these individuals was 50 years, compared with 49 years for the profession as a whole. Clearly, we must bring younger people into the social work field and, in particular, into a specialization in aging (Marshall & Altpeter, 2005) to meet "essential" care requirements in a variety of settings (Volland & Berkman, 2004).

Unfortunately, schools of social work often fail to offer adequate gerontological content in their courses and "have limited resources and capability to strengthen gerontology education, and limited incentive to improve the situation" (CSWE/SAGE-SW, 2001, p. 6). Students and faculty often hold stereotypical and ageist views, and "most students" have little interest in aging as a field. Students with an interest in aging often receive little support or encouragement, and faculty members have "little or no" background in aging. As a result, most BSW and MSW students receive "little or no training or experience in working with older adults" (p. 6), and these knowledge and care experiences are frequently limited (Volland, Berkman, Stein, & Vaghy, 2000). From a broader perspective, the public, government officials, and employers are often unaware of social workers' unique skills and the role they might play in addressing the demographic imperative.

In conjunction with *A Blueprint for the New Millennium*, CSWE and the John A. Hartford Foundation collaborated on the Hartford Geriatric Enrichment in Social Work Education project, aimed at infusing content on aging into social work curricula (<http://depts.washington.edu/gerorich/index.shtml>). A total of 67 BSW, MSW, and combined programs participated in this three-year project. The Hartford Foundation has funded related initiatives, such as the Faculty Scholars and Doctoral Fellows programs, to establish gerontological leaders in research and education. Hartford has led initiatives to improve curriculums on aging and practice methods through the Faculty Development and Geriatric Enrichment programs (<http://depts.washington.edu/gerorich/hartford/hartford.shtml>). Here, we examine the Practicum Partnership Program (PPP) and a related initiative, the Geriatric Social Work Public Policy Center (GSWPPC), funded by Atlantic Philanthropies.

THE NATIONAL LEADERSHIP COALITION

In 2003 nine aging and social work organizations—CSWE, NASW, the National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work (NADD), the Association of Baccalaureate Program Directors (BPD), the Society for Social Work and Research, Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research, the Action Network for Social Work Education and Research, the Veterans Administration, and the New York Academy of Medicine (NYAM)—joined to establish the National Leadership Coalition (NLC). Their intent was to provide coordinated national leadership to demonstrate the importance and efficacy of social workers who work with older adults. The NLC committed itself to developing a comprehensive strategy to recruit, retain, and sustain professional social workers to meet the aging imperative that is already underway.

NLC's members agreed on the importance of a multilevel approach to guarantee the presence of professional social workers committed to aging issues. Four goals were developed to sustain training and education in geriatric social work over the long term: (1) assessing the existing and expected supply and demand of social workers; (2) advancing an explicit rationale for why social work services are cost-effective; (3) exploring the concrete implications for policy and practice of social work's effectiveness; and (4) raising funds to further social work education and training in geriatrics. The NLC then specified five focus areas for additional work: workforce, image, policy, practice research, and education and training.

The NLC is now working on several initiatives within these focus areas. NASW, and specifically its Center for Workforce Studies, is taking the lead in addressing workforce and image issues. To address workforce issues, the center conducts studies to comprehensively assess the presence of social workers in policy and practice at all levels. The goals involve determining social work employment trends, identifying obstacles in delivering quality services, shaping professional social work training needs, and promoting social work roles throughout multiple care systems. The center is also conducting a study of licensed social workers nationwide, partnering with the Center for Health Workforce Studies at the School of Public Health, State University of New York at Albany. The study aims to characterize the current professional social work

labor force through comprehensive analysis and investigate targeted populations and services provided to them by social workers.

NLC members have created a widespread media campaign aimed at improving the image of social work and demonstrating the cost-effectiveness of social work practice. By gathering stories from families and employers of those served by social workers, this national campaign, titled "Help Starts Here," promotes the wide variety of work that social workers do and includes information on seniors and aging, children and families, health and wellness, mind and spirit, and a host of other issues (see <http://www.helpstartshere.org>). In another initiative, NASW collaborated with CSWE, NADD, and BPD to host the 2005 Social Work Congress, a milestone event, which on March 18 convened more than 400 social work leaders from across the United States to articulate imperatives for the profession over the next decade. A primary outcome of this meeting was identifying a commitment to "assure excellence in aging knowledge, skills, and competencies at all levels of social work education, practice, and research" (<http://www.cswe.org/link/Final%20Imperatives.pdf>).

In terms of addressing policy, NLC members are exploring common understanding of social work at the government level, identifying best practices and essential geriatric competencies, and developing position papers documenting the significance of social work services. One aspect of this effort is being established through the GSWPPC at NYAM and is discussed later in this column. NLC members are also working on a strategy to secure reimbursement for social work practice, as done with other health professionals who provide care to older adults.

The NLC has addressed practice research and training. First, addressing practice research has involved creating an agenda that emphasizes demonstrated best practices in aging-focused social work, as well as the use of geriatric competencies for social workers. Second, in regard to training, NLC members have enhanced current competencies for various levels of education and established support for assistance in social work education, an example of which is the PPP, also discussed in further detail later in this column. By involving multiple stakeholders, the NLC has contributed to a change process to sustain social workers in their roles as health professionals. The work of the NLC, in turn, has

provided the foundation for activities of the Social Work Leadership Institute at NYAM.

THE SOCIAL WORK LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

The Social Work Leadership Institute (SWLI), formerly known as the “Coordinating Center” of the Geriatric Practicum Partnership Program, is now one of nearly 20 divisions and initiatives at NYAM. As mentioned, the SWLI has contributed to two of the five NLC focus areas by addressing policy and education and training. Currently, the SWLI aspires to improve on coordination of care for the aged population through promotion of independent living. The SWLI also aims to instill leadership principles in education and training of social workers by equipping future professionals with knowledge and skills to understand and manage increasingly complex systems of care.

Informed by the work of the NLC, the SWLI’s central initiatives are the GSWPPC, supported by Atlantic Philanthropies, and the PPP, funded by the John A. Hartford Foundation as part of the Geriatric Social Work Initiative. The GSWPPC seeks to build on the policy work of the NLC by solidifying initiatives in public policy that guarantee continued enrichment of health and support services for older adults. By developing a long-range policy agenda to be adopted by relevant national and regional organizations, the center supports high quality of care coordination and works to ensure social workers’ preparedness to meet the needs of our rapidly aging older adults. The center is establishing a systematic process for monitoring the public policy-relevant activities of agents involved in promoting improved coordination of care for older adults and their families. The center translates these results into policy advocacy materials to reinforce the presence of social work in care of older adults. By articulating evidence-based research for social work practices in serving elderly people, as well as for public policy agendas, the center will develop comprehensive and targeted communication plans for consumers, practitioners, and policymakers to promote the value and contributions of geriatric social workers. These preliminary activities will lay the groundwork to lead and coordinate public policy advocacy campaigns that reduce barriers to the roles of social workers in caring for older adults.

The PPP is an educational program that focuses on “real world” enhancements to field practicum experiences in master’s-level schools of social work

nationwide. Five essential components serve as “architecture” for the program: (1) university–community partnerships, (2) competency-driven education, (3) integrated rotations across multiple populations and disciplines, (4) expanded roles for field instructors, and (5) focused recruitment of students to a specialization in aging. SWLI provides continuous technical assistance to PPP sites so that their programs will be sustained beyond initial support.

The success of the PPP was demonstrated in six sites at 11 MSW programs nationwide, two of which were consortia and involved multiple training facilities per setting. Combined, the six sites also had the collaboration of more than 100 community agencies. Aging-related field placements increased 43 percent across these sites, and more than 400 social work leaders with an aging-specific focus were trained. In addition, nearly 80 percent of PPP graduates were still working in the field of aging one to two years out of school. To build on these positive outcomes, the John A. Hartford Foundation will support 60 graduate social work programs over the next eight years in implementing high-quality, aging-rich field experiences for MSW students. By continuously promoting increased numbers of graduate students who specialize in gerontology, and simultaneously developing new sites for aging-related fieldwork to become a permanent foundation of social work education, it is expected that the program will become the norm for aging specialization in social work programs. Other SWLI projects involve collaboration with NADD to foster leadership development, as well as a partnership with NASW’s Center for Workforce Studies in developing an online training course on geriatric social work competencies.

CONCLUSION: SOCIAL WORK AND THE DEMOGRAPHIC IMPERATIVE

The aging of the population, along with increased life expectancy and a “shrinking” number of “family caregivers,” presents the United States with serious challenges (Behrman & Volland, 2003). Social workers, with their experience in case management, “service coordination” and provision, advocacy, policy analysis and development, and other areas, are well positioned to address the needs of this new world. Yet, as noted earlier, there are obstacles to social work leadership in the “next society” (Drucker, 2001).

We can build on the experience of the NLC, the SWLI, and related projects to position our profession to play a leadership role in the 21st century. By promoting diverse fundraising strategies, establishing dedicated advocacy and policy development, and applying a broad, competency-based education, we can further contribute to improvements in aging and ensure the continuing relevance of social work practice and education. **HSW**

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