July 29, 2008

Testimony of

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Before the
Committee on Education and Labor
Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities

“Caring for the Vulnerable: The State of Social Work in America”
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 direct service and administrative capacities in 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 currently am the 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 the lives of individuals and families and help build strong communities. 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 I speak before you today, the nation faces many complex and converging challenges – from our military engagement abroad, to rising food and commodity prices and untenable mortgages at home. While each of these challenges individually demand the comprehensive engagement of the nation’s social workers, these trends – taken together – suggest a significantly increased need for professional social services within vulnerable communities nationally. While it is clear that the nation’s social work community will be strained to meet this increased demand, a broader assessment of these true scope of these demands, along with a comprehensive plan to provide for adequate service to all in need is of vital necessity.

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, often the result of industrialization, 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. The settlement houses provided important services, helping immigrants adjust to their new homes, and providing needed social support and job training. Settlement house workers, Charity Organization Societies (the early version of family service organizations), and welfare workers worked together throughout the end of the century to preserve healthy communities and to ensure emotional, social, financial, and physical well-being.

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 and to meet the needs of those in need of temporary homes and assistance due to age and disability. The development of social insurance programs grew out of the experiences of social workers.

The profession is dedicated to restoring hope for the American people and continued to see significant demand for social work services 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 continued to see growth in the social work profession, from involvement in special education and early education and child development programs, to substance abuse and mental health programs to the increasing recognition of the need for psychosocial supports for persons and their families dealing with chronic and acute illnesses or dealing with a family member who has Alzheimer’s disease or a developmental disability. However, since much of society only encounters a social worker when dealing with a problem, such as moving a family member from a hospital to a nursing home, there is limited public understanding of the role of the social worker. However, these professionals continue to help individuals, families, and communities across the country and 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 and demands 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 they also work with persons of diverse ethnic, cultural, racial, economic and social backgrounds. Social workers help people 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 are uniquely trained to work with people in their environment, looking at all dimensions of the individual’s life in the context of their family and the social, financial, and community resources to develop a plan to meet the individual’s needs. 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 counseling, caregiver and family support, and health education but will also need to understand the course of chronic illness, the impact of medications, and the experience of loss 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 skill 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.

Social Work and the Federal Government

The profession of social work is influenced by government policy making, particularly at the federal level. One key aspect of this influence includes financial management of agencies and organizations in which social workers are employed. Social workers must often deal with a complex system of financing that includes public and foundation grants, client-paid fees, state contracts, insurance reimbursements, and individual donations. Social service organizations have relied on federal and state revenue through Title XX of the Social Security Act, revenue sharing, social service block grants, Medicare, Medicaid, and other federal programs.

In addition to the susceptibility of the third sector to government funding, social work has also been influenced by federal policy authorization since its inception. During times of social unrest including the Great Depression, Civil Rights Movement, and War on Poverty programs such as the 1935 Health, Education, and Welfare Act, Works Progress Administration Act in 1938, National Mental Health Act in 1946, Civil Rights Act, Food Stamp Act, and Economic Opportunity Act in 1964, and Medicaid in 1965, have all had significant influence over the services that social workers could provide, how they provided those services, and how they were reimbursed for the services they did provide.
The federal government has recently promoted social welfare, and ultimately the profession of social work, through a number of bills, proposed legislation, and initiatives. The government has recognized that social work is necessary to solve the seemingly intractable social challenges throughout time. 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. In fact, the VA requires that a “social work” position be filled by an educated, professionally trained, and licensed social worker. However, in order for clinical social workers to be reimbursed through our Medicare system, they must have a master’s or doctoral degree in social work, at least two years of supervised clinical social work practice, and be licensed or certified as a clinical social worker in the state in which the services are being performed. The United States Department of Health and Human Services-Indian Health Services requires that a “social worker” position be filled by a licensed social worker and be supervised by a licensed social worker. Elementary and secondary school social workers must hold a master’s degree in social work and be licensed. Nursing facilities with more than 120 beds must have at least one bachelor’s level social worker to provide services as a licensed health professional. Social work is also a key component of the interdisciplinary team working with Hospice.

Government entities have recognized and publicly stated the value and necessity of the social work profession. The National Institute on Aging projects that by 2010, 60,000 to 70,000 social workers will be needed in the field of gerontology. According to the NASW Center for Workforce Studies, there are currently 30,000 licensed social workers specializing in aging. Likewise the Institute of Medicine in Cancer Care for the Whole Patient, Meeting Psychosocial Health Needs, lists social workers as key providers of psychosocial health services as they relate to cancer patients and states that, “psychosocial problems can be created or exacerbated by cancer and its treatment, as well as predate the illness. The failure to address these problems results in needless patient and family suffering, obstructs quality health care, and can potentially affect the course of the disease.” (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2008).

There have been significant government investments in the profession of social work over time, but there have also been a set of challenges that must be overcome in order to grow and thrive in the coming years.

Challenges

Despite over 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 40% 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. As mentioned above, 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 (Council on Social Work Education/ SAFE-SW, 2001). 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 proud to say that my name is Gary Bailey and I am a proud professional social worker. It is my strong professional opinion that the demand for social work is increasing at a rate much faster than the current social work community can meet alone.

References

Council on Social Work Education/SAFE-SW. (2001) A Blueprint for the New Millennium; Strengthening the Impact of Social Work to Improve the Quality of Life for Older Adults and Their Families.