



# Expanding Field Placement Possibilities: Considering Public Safety/Service Agencies as Placement Options

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## Introduction and Background

The profession of social work has a long history of providing services in agencies that do not have a primary social work focus (Dane & Simon, 1991). This is related to the field of social work being so vast that social workers can ultimately be involved in all stages and situations of life. Social work at times has an image problem of sorts due to this vastness, where the general public may not understand what social workers do. At minimum, they may have a very limited view of social workers, such as equating “social work” with “child protection.” The field of social work is as diverse as the interests of social workers, which means that social workers appear in a wide variety of settings involving direct or indirect work with people. Social workers are often the silent soldiers working in the background anywhere that needs, injustices, or crises exist.

Field education, as the signature pedagogy of social work programs, offers the opportunity for students to get real-life experience and put into practice the skills and knowledge the classroom has provided them. Public safety/service agencies are a growing area of potential field placements for students. These agencies are examples of *host settings*, defined by Dane and Simon (1991) as “organizations whose mission and decision making are defined and dominated by people who are not social workers” (p. 208). In these systems, social workers fill a niche outside of the scope of the normal services provided. Social work education programs have a constant need for more field placements and exploring the use of host settings has become more common and at times necessary. In the current social and political climate, placements in public safety/service agencies not only provide unique benefits and experiences, but arguably are more necessary than ever.

## Current & Historical Context

The current social and political climate in the United States and around the world has been simmering over the past few years as race, religion, class, and the intersectionality of all of these have again become forefront issues. A boiling point seems all but inevitable. There has been the assumption by many that issues of racism specifically have been extinguished, but the festering reality of institutionalized oppression and implicit bias has never been adequately addressed. There is a growing, and at times painful, awareness of the continued disparities built into our society. This has been highlighted by the highly publicized death of multiple black men in interactions with police and the subsequent violence and unrest affecting these communities and the public entities that serve them.

As the country struggles with how to address these issues, social workers are in a unique position to offer support, education, and services to both the community and the public safety and service agencies involved. There is a growing recognition of the role social workers can play in helping to address these societal and cultural issues, which means that social work students will need to be prepared for entry into this practice domain. As public safety and service agencies around the country have begun adding social workers to their teams, it has become even more important to cultivate field placement opportunities that will provide students with the skills and experience needed to address the complex issues involved.

The profession of social work is built on advocacy and service to others through challenging injustice and empowering individuals, families, and communities. Field education has been an integral part of social work programs since their inception because it allows students the opportunity to learn by doing. Although classroom education provides a theoretical backdrop and can help students to begin developing basic social work skills, field placements put that knowledge into practice. Field experience provides students opportunities for personal and professional growth and development.

Public safety and service entities have become new field placement options that are being explored by social work programs across the U.S. These opportunities may lie with law enforcement agencies, fire departments, emergency medical services, medical examiner services, or adult and juvenile corrections. Social workers have a long professional history of crisis intervention and management services. Coupled with traditional social work skills and values, professional social workers are increasingly

being seen as valuable assets in public safety and service agencies. At this time, no large-scale research studies have evaluated the benefit of social workers in such positions, but there is some anecdotal evidence supporting the use of social workers in public safety and service agencies. There is a great deal of similarity in what social work students can offer these entities even though the categories of public safety/services agencies may differ greatly in the services they provide. Opportunities in each category will be discussed separately.

## Law Enforcement

Law enforcement entities may exist at the city, county, state, or federal level. Although their main service is generally thought to relate to enforcing societal laws, approximately 80% of law enforcement officers' work involves service related tasks (Patterson, 2013). After all, who else is available for most people as a point of contact for an after-hours family crisis? Law enforcement officers are often the first to arrive on scene in the event of an emergency, regardless of whether a crime has been committed. Law enforcement officers respond to a high rate of calls related to mental health or substance use as well as situations involving violence. As social workers frequently provide services to these same community members in other settings, there is a natural overlap in clientele being served.

Based on recently publicized issues between law enforcement and communities of color, law enforcement agencies may seem to have an obvious need for a social work perspective. Many law enforcement agencies, at all levels across the U.S., are attempting to address these community relations issues. These efforts have been met with varying degrees of success, partially due to the general societal perspective that punishment is necessary for "criminals" rather than providing support or addressing environmental/societal barriers. Social workers are increasingly being added to law enforcement entities in more visible partnerships to address social issues affecting communities.

The inclusion of social workers in law enforcement agencies is actually not a new practice. The father of modern policing in the United States, August Vollmer, delivered a speech in 1919 to the *International Association of Chiefs of Police*, entitled "The Policeman as Social Worker" (Vollmer, 1971). The first documented employment of a social worker within a police department appeared in 1951 (Coordinating Police, 1952). Further publications since that time have described success in numerous police social work positions (Dean, Lumb, & Proctor, 2000; Finn, 1988; Holmes, 1982; Michaels & Treger, 1973; Penner, 1959; Vallianatos, 2000). Despite this history, police social workers

only account for a very small proportion of social workers in this country.

Law enforcement officers serve as the gatekeepers for the criminal justice system. Integrating a social work perspective will not address all systemic issues. However, at this front-line level it could have far reaching effects in the criminal justice system by improving crisis counseling and mediation in social problems such as mental illness, substance use, and domestic violence (Patterson, 2013). Police social workers interact directly with individuals and communities providing counseling, mediation, and assistance obtaining services. In addition, police social workers provide support to the officers themselves through stress management activities and education on the social problems to which officers respond (Patterson, 2013). Social workers are being utilized to help address community relations issues through trainings to officers and outreach services to communities. Including police social work as a placement opportunity for students can provide excellent learning opportunities in areas of assessment, intervention, service coordination and referrals, culturally competent service delivery, community relations, and policy issues.

### **Adult and Juvenile Corrections**

Both community-based services and institutional correctional facilities provide additional opportunities for social workers. There is a significant overlap in clientele served by social workers and the correctional systems, with youth and adults. Although the United States continues to maintain a belief that “punishment” is necessary for criminals, social workers help the correctional system take a more holistic view of what is in the best interest of both the community and the offender through a strengths-based perspective.

Social workers are being used within the correctional system to address systemic and environmental barriers that contribute to recidivism rates as well as to provide direct service in the form of mental health and substance use treatment. More than half of inmates suffer from some type of mental illness (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). Both “behind the walls” and for offenders under community-supervision, social workers provide mental health and substance abuse treatment services to support the needs of these clients. Social workers are employed in the community as correctional officers, providing probation and parole services for both adults and juveniles with an emphasis on support, case management, and treatment.

As the U.S. prison population continues to grow, macro-level social workers address policy issues related to criminalization of offenses and sentencing laws, particularly

when these contribute to racial disparities in the criminal justice system. Social workers also work within correctional facilities to address policies related to the unique needs of female inmates, juveniles, transgender inmates, and inmates with mental health needs. Social workers practice at all levels of correctional facilities from county jails to large maximum-security prisons. In addition to direct mental health and substance use services, social workers provide case management and advocate for educational and vocational training to better support inmates' success upon release. This is a small sampling of the tasks and responsibilities entrusted to social workers in the correctional system. Social work students can successfully be integrated into any of these practice areas in both adult and juvenile corrections.

### **Fire Departments & Emergency Medical Services**

Like law enforcement, fire departments and general emergency medical services (EMS) respond to a continuum of crisis situations. These situations can involve accidents, injuries, and even death. The psychological trauma experienced by collateral persons involved in these incidents can range in severity depending on the individual. The psychological effects of such incidents on some people can be worse than the physical trauma of the incident itself. The fire department and EMS personnel are not in a position to provide psychological and/or emotional support for the collateral people involved in the crisis. A timely intervention to address emotional and psychological responses to crises may help the individual recover more quickly and avoid long-term psychological effects that could persist into a mental health disorder (Roberts, 2000). Social workers may already provide crisis intervention services in many forms at agencies throughout the community, but there can be a number of barriers to people accessing those services. Such services may not be available immediately, yet they are necessary at the time of a crisis.

By incorporating social workers into interdisciplinary emergency response teams with fire departments and EMS, social workers can be tasked with addressing the emotional and psychological needs of individuals, families, and even communities following a crisis. Social workers attached to EMS and fire departments can serve as gatekeepers, facilitating service delivery to persons involved in a crisis situation. For example, social workers can link people to options for food, medication, or other necessities. A social worker can provide focused attention on the collateral persons involved in a crisis, freeing the other emergency personnel to tend to their specific job duties. This also provides fire and EMS personnel with psychological freedom from fear of neglecting the humans involved in the crisis situation. Especially as compassion fatigue and burnout can be common in firefighters and EMS personnel, the involvement of social

workers potentially could have a positive effect on the first responders themselves as sources of support (Cacciatore, Carlson, Michaelis, Klimek, & Steffan, 2011; Fullerton, McCarroll, Ursano, & Wright 1992; Marmar et al., 1999).

Field practicum students can be integrated into standing emergency response teams as well as utilized as part of standard emergency services. In this capacity, students have the opportunity for direct intervention with individuals and communities for crisis assessment, intervention, and advocacy. Macro level opportunities may also exist in regards to policies, procedures, and funding needs.

### **Medical Examiner/Coroner Office**

Medical examiners and coroners are responsible for responding to sudden and unexpected deaths, determining both the cause of death (the underlying event leading to the death) and manner of death (i.e. homicide, suicide, accident, and undetermined). Medical examiners and coroners are also responsible for identifying the deceased, notifying the next-of-kin, conducting a scene investigation, investigating events leading to the death, collecting medical and social history, interviewing family, documenting investigations, and determining if an autopsy is necessary (Hanzlick, 2006). Like the other crisis response services discussed above, medical examiner and coroner staff often interact with the shocked and grieving family and friends of the deceased, who also have possibly experienced trauma as part of or in addition to their grief. Medical examiner/coroner services are often unable to provide any direct assistance or services to these persons.

Social workers in these offices can assist with crisis intervention, service connection, referral assessment, and immediate grief support both at the death scene and after the initial event has occurred to ensure compassionate follow-up with family and friends of the decedent (Kintzle & Bride, 2010). Macro practice opportunities exist through the development of policies and procedures, community outreach activities, coordination of death review teams, and contribution to annual reports. Micro practice opportunities exist in the form of direct assessment, intervention, and bereavement support for the family of the deceased. Practicum students can easily be integrated into any of these roles with the appropriate supervision and support.

### **Benefits & Challenges**

A placement in any public safety/service agency will provide a wide range of benefits for either undergraduate or graduate social work students. Many times the unique

benefits of these placements are the same as the challenges. Students will have the opportunity to work in an interdisciplinary setting. Such experiences often push students to stretch their thinking about situations, especially as they encounter other professionals who may adhere to different values and ethical standards. Although some students may risk disillusionment in such a situation, others will cultivate new and creative means of being effective in meeting clients' needs in the midst of restrictive system limitations. Students also may be afforded the opportunity to network with other disciplines outside of the host setting, creating additional learning experiences. First and foremost, the student's educational training, personal characteristics, and practice skills should be taken into account when considering a placement in such a setting. Students may also benefit from specialized training focusing on working in a host setting. Although social work often involves crisis situations, the host settings described in this paper all regularly deal with situations that are emotionally challenging, even for a seasoned professional.

The types of public service agencies described above each provide very different services in very different manners. Collectively though, they all have direct contact with community members, typically in complex crisis situations. Each agency operates at a direct interactional level but also offers opportunities at the policy level. This potentially provides opportunities for students interested in either micro or macro practice. There may also be research opportunities for students to evaluate the services being provided by these agencies, both in what is working and where adjustments may be useful.

In such placements, students have the opportunity to potentially create both indirect and direct change in public safety/service agencies simply by promoting social work values. This may be even more important as social workers as a profession attempt to affect change in the current political climate. Field educators need to be mindful of not putting students in a position where the students could be seen as antagonistic towards the public service agency. However, field programs can prepare students to face such situations by providing support through adequate social work supervision, support from a field liaison, and intentional field seminar coursework. Sometimes simply "being present" can have a more powerful effect than forceful advocacy for change. This is especially relevant when considering the power dynamic of a field student in any organization, but particularly in host settings, where a social work perspective may not be as prevalent in the organization's culture and climate.

One of the most important challenges in cultivating a successful field placement for students in public safety/service agencies is related to supervision. Although there has

been an increase in the number of such agencies beginning to employ social workers, these are still anomalies in most areas of the U.S. This means that the majority of such placements will require the recruitment of an outside social work supervisor. It is most beneficial for an outside supervisor to have a relationship or experience with the public service agency, but this is not always possible. Field educators may have to help cultivate a relationship between the outside supervisor and the agency. The social work supervisor may also benefit from additional training about providing supervision in a host setting or on the specific culture/perspective of the public service agency.

### **Additional Considerations**

Creating field placement opportunities for students in such public safety/service agencies can be intimidating if there is no past history or connection between a program and local entities. It can take a great deal of work to establish the necessary relationships, which will likely fall to the field administrator. Additionally, the public service agencies need to be provided an in-depth understanding about the role/function of students and social work values and ethics. An open atmosphere will need to be established early on to promote dialogue as difficulties in practice and perspective are likely to arise. It would be beneficial for programs to collect data and publish findings related to experiences of students in these settings to provide a more formal exploration of the use of such placements. Despite the additional time and energy cultivating such relationships can take, these settings have the potential to provide diverse and extraordinary learning experiences for students.

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