

## Reaffirming Our Mission: From Past to Present

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Ruth Mayden, MSS, LSW

The theme for exploration is "Reaffirming Our Mission." For the past ten years, I have spent many hours contemplating who I am, why I chose the field of social work, and how I conduct myself as a person who cares about society, family, and friends. I would like the reader to have a kind of conversation with me—the kind of conversation during which we can quietly connect as thoughts, fears, and hopes are shared.

Sometimes, social workers make already difficult jobs more challenging by guarding turf with jealous eyes, while coveting the turf of one's peers. We have created a language of abbreviations that only we can decipher—ILP, ISP, COAC, CLA, ASFA, CPS—and the list continues indefinitely. It is as though we deliberately intend to confuse our clients and the public about the work that we do, and we have been very successful in confusing others. Sometimes, we guard and conceal our program ideas for fear that others will try them and receive the funding we desire. Our funding sources often put too much emphasis upon success and solutions, rather than on progress and improvement. On paper, accountability and monitoring overshadow technical assistance. Programs may not be given the opportunity to learn from mistakes, and programs that prevent problems are hard pressed to receive funding.

The public is rarely interested in what social workers do, or whom we serve, until something goes wrong. Our society would rather place the blame upon others than provide appropriate assistance; and it has unrealistic expectations. Many people are not willing to pay the price for undoing the harm that has been done, and cannot see the benefit of investing in programs that will prevent future harm. Too many legislators pander to the call of the voting public, condemning those in need, while allegedly saving the "taxpayer." Who among us does not pay some form of wage or sales tax?

In most respects, it is not that there is one major conflict between different people and ideologies as

much as there are dozens of minor conflicts and disagreements that make communication and living together so difficult. What we need may be summed up as follows:

- An honest and clear apolitical and unbiased analysis of human needs and program deficiencies.
- A delivery system that minimizes eligibility barriers and allows administrators, managers, and line workers to collaborate freely and do their jobs more effectively.
- Media that are more interested in understanding and educating, than in exposing opportunistic flaws.
- Access to computer technology that provides accurate and comprehensive information and referral services for consumers and providers.
- Increased financial incentives that favor collaboration over competition, and incentives for quality service rather than cheaper, often erroneously called "more efficient," services.
- An inquiring and supportive public willing to put time and energy into working with social service providers to improve the quality of service.
- Social work leadership that will rise above turf wars and work together to develop better programs, and to educate, train, and support more front-line social workers. This leadership must inform policy makers and funders that time is running out in our ability to address and contain the growing levels of discontent among people who are underemployed, undereducated, and, consequently, undervalued.

Currently, most schools and departments of social work try to help students understand that these are concerns that cannot be ignored. However, we have not been as effective in giving those students the full range of skills they need in order to be effective.

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### **Educating Social Work Students**

We have made a very conscious decision to keep social work values, methodologies, ethics, and perspectives at the forefront of our approach in teaching intervention, planning, and implementation. We have tried to help our students learn how to embody social work values such as self-determination, empowerment, and community participation. We spend a great deal of time in both formal and informal settings trying to figure out how to respond to the practice pressures students feel as they become part of the delivery of services provided by their respective field instruction agencies. We have included content in practice courses, as well as course electives, that emphasize the need always to consider the cultural influences that impact practice and the context of practice. Our elective offerings often reflect specific fields of practice such as mental health, child welfare, health, aging, and children and adolescents.

Most programs attempt to supplement the formal classroom experience with opportunities for students to participate in informal dialogues with social workers and those involved in social service planning and delivery. For example, there are discussions about social work in various settings, providing a forum to consider the ways in which social work practice can be effective within agencies and institutions where social work is not the dominant profession (e.g., universities, hospitals, psychiatric facilities, and employee assistance programs). Our ability to address interdisciplinary issues has been severely hampered. Students often resist hearing about settings they are not interested in, while faculty resist talking about settings they are not familiar with.

### **Social Work as a Profession**

Seasoned social workers will agree that the forces of the Civil Rights Movement, the War on Poverty, and the Anti-Vietnam War protests have shaped the society we have become. Most of today's social work students grew up watching the

debates of the Reagan and Bush era, and probably felt the anxiety in their own homes and communities as unemployment rates increased, racial tensions rose again, and immigration increased. The past struggle for civil rights and reproductive choices have almost become dull historical debates for many of today's students, while many of us will never forget the impact of these hard fought battles. Community activism has been replaced by the latest in "bio-psychosocial" therapeutic approaches to the emerging DSM categories of dysfunction.

Social workers cannot afford to allow a fall into a series of missteps. How much energy can be spent upon disagreements regarding who among us should be licensed to do what? There are some professional social work issues that must be addressed because of our historical roots and commitments as well as for the sake of our own livelihoods. However, we cannot become so specialized in superficial ways that we lose sight of why we became social workers in the first place.

#### **The Role of the NASW**

The National Office of the National Association of Social Workers has been involved in a three-year campaign to control and focus better its energies and resources upon actions that can make a difference in the lives of both social workers and consumers. Many feel somewhat estranged from NASW as a national organization and more comfortable with NASW as a state and local organization. Some are not comfortable with NASW on any level. Before being called upon to do a specific task for one's state chapter, one frequently had no involvement with NASW.

NASW is still working on outreach strategies for new and disaffected members and certainly does not want to lose those members who have been loyal for so long. In October 1998, forty-four organizations, whose members are professional social workers, answered the invitation of NASW President Josephine Allen and Executive Director Josephine Nieves to come together and become reacquainted. This event was fueled by the vision to

harness the collaborative power of our profession to make effective change for all of humanity. It was the first gathering of its kind and a fitting celebration of the 100th Anniversary of our founding as a profession. Issues surrounding social justice and the profession were discussed, and a commitment was made to reconvene to find new ways of confronting old issues that have been around for far too long.

The Delegate Assembly, the Association's policy and program priorities-setting body, met in August 1999. The delegates were asked to consider long-term goals, short-term professional and organizational goals, and social policy goals, and to adopt social policy statements that speak to the issues of today and tomorrow. These policy statements, which reaffirm our mission, were recently released in a publication aptly called "Social Work Speaks."

I first encountered the profession of social work some thirty years ago, when Lyndon Johnson and the U.S. Congress declared the War on Poverty. This war was to be fought by allocating federal funds to states and local communities to address social problems from the ground up. From my relatively protected perch, I had little firsthand knowledge of poverty, but as a college freshman majoring in English, I benefited from the federal initiatives almost immediately. I was employed by the Neighborhood Youth Corps to work with low-income high school students. I served as a liaison between potential employers and the youth, encouraging employers to support these students so that they could take advantage of an opportunity to work. My experience with the Neighborhood Youth Corps opened both my eyes and mind to the complexities of providing and receiving services.

After three summers of full-time employment and four years of part-time work during the academic year, I realized that the Neighborhood Youth Corps, like so many well-intentioned social service

programs, had a very limited understanding of the impact of poverty upon individuals, families, and communities. Furthermore, I was unable to discern any attempt to address the roots of poverty. I certainly was not prepared to assist the work site supervisors to teach the youth the value of work, nor how to handle work responsibilities and plan a career path.

### **Challenges to Today's Social Worker**

A concrete parallel can be drawn between such an experience with the Youth Corps and current public policy—little or nothing is done to address the harsh realities of poverty. The challenges faced today, if the past is a prediction, will assume a more daunting form in the days to come. The three issues which will test professional endurance, skills, and values, are continuing economic issues, political divisions, and racial and ethnic divisions. The ever-widening economic gulf between the poor and near poor, and the middle and upper middle classes, will continue to exacerbate the already pervasive intolerance reflected in the policies and program decisions of the last few years. People who are barely scraping by will be even more vocal in blaming the poor and/or people of color for the economic conditions affecting the entire country. Many who are economically sound and prosperous will try even harder to maintain that comfort level at the expense of others. The declining quality of public education will produce an array of high school graduates barely literate and equally unprepared for the world of work. In the Neighborhood Youth Corps days, the public school system was expected to provide the basics for job entry and good citizenship. Although we hold the same expectations today, there is very little to ensure that these competencies are met. Witness the gradual shrinking of core and extracurricular programs in many urban, suburban, and rural schools. Given the vital importance of technology and its implications for future employment, chances are that many urban and rural youth will not be able to compete for the jobs of tomorrow.

Within the various political sectors, polarization has occurred around such far-reaching issues as reproductive freedom, gay and lesbian rights, spirituality and religion, and technological advances in modern medicine, making it virtually impossible to conduct civil debates in some settings. Our inherent ethnocentrism has rendered us ill-suited for intelligent and thoughtful discussions with citizens and policy makers in the international arena, for we lack a formal understanding of foreign cultures. This unfortunate trend will only hinder our ability to live together harmoniously as neighbors in an increasingly diverse global society. As citizens, we have little faith that politicians will understand that it has taken decades to devolve to the present state. It no doubt will take decades before we can begin to reclaim our place as a civilized society. When one thinks about our nation's history, the words "civilized," "humane," "caring," and "welcoming" do not readily leap to mind.

As a person of color, I struggle with our country's inability to recognize past and ongoing injustices towards non-whites and, at the same time, to find new ways to combine legislation, conversation, and association to move ahead. Racism, economics, and politics are powerful influences, and it is often difficult to discern which of the three is exerting the most influence. The underprivileged and undervalued populations must confront the intrinsic ethnic and socioeconomic barriers that divide our nation. The poor and near poor, the legal immigrant, the elderly, the homeless, the chronically mentally ill, and the physically disabled often are without viable avenues of recourse.

### **The Efforts of the NASW**

NASW has pledged and is committed to promoting and protecting the field of social work and practicing social workers. It has pledged to promote and protect clients and community, and to advance quality practice and policy. To achieve these pledges, the National Board of Directors has set priorities and sharpened its focus so that we can concentrate our efforts upon job and salary promotion; on issues that affect clients and communities;

and on opportunities to advance quality social work practice and policy. Often, the activities in these categories overlap. For instance, by protecting and expanding social work positions, the rights of clients and services for clients are also protected.

### **Legislation**

NASW promotes legislation which ensures and protects the ability of clinical social workers to bill Medicare directly for mental health services for patients in skilled nursing facilities. The "Medicare Social Work Equity Bill" has bipartisan sponsorship in the U.S. House of Representatives, and NASW chapters and members are involved in moving this legislation forward. The managed care industry requires regulation to halt some of its objectionable practices. There also is an opportunity here to increase social work employment and influence policy that affects our clients. The changes in health care delivery are driving us to take measures of protective action.

NASW's aim is to ensure that social workers do more than simply weather these changes, but rather seeks to uncover opportunity and come out ahead. Ethical conflicts make it difficult to negotiate the slippery interface between the rules and procedures of managed care organizations and professional treatment decisions. Extensive administrative paperwork is an extra burden because members are not reimbursed for the time they spend on these forms. Concern also relates to client confidentiality and privacy. Members who are compelled to speak out against some of these practices find themselves in a dangerous "double-bind;" although it is crucial that they confront the system on behalf of their clients, such action may mean that members will be cut from provider panels – their source of employment.

NASW is currently constructing a multi-pronged, macro-strategy which will include legislation. As states attempt to regulate managed care organizations, NASW chapters and their lobbyists are working on legislative proposals to ensure a Patients' Bill of Rights, confidentiality, and privacy. Issues relating to the Patients' Bill of Rights legislation include welfare accountability tracking, fair minimum wage, and hate crime prevention.

### **Litigation**

Litigation is another useful tool that NASW employs. Both National and several Local Chapters are parties to lawsuits to rein in the power of managed care organizations and protect social work jobs and clients' rights.

### **Negotiation with Managed Care**

NASW is negotiating directly with managed care's corporate leaders, opening the channels of communication for social workers, as well as access to corporate power. When we met with Magellan's Chief Executive and financial officers, representing one of the nation's largest MCOs, we articulated social workers' concerns about reimbursement rates, access to provider panels, the burden of administrative paperwork, and the limits to and quality of care. As a result, NASW named a representative to Magellan's National Advisory Commission, allowing our organization to have a voice at the table. We also met with Veterans Administration officials, promoting equity in social work pay.

### **Policy**

NASW is working hard to provide seats for social workers at other policy tables, as well. NASW and the Clinical Social Work Federation joined the Health Care Practitioners' Advisory Council to raise relevant social work concerns about consumer and provider issues. This group meets regularly with the National Committee for Quality Assurance, an accrediting body that establishes standards of care quality for managed care organizations and health insurance companies. NASW secured a twenty million dollar grant program to hire social workers, counselors, and psychologists for team-based elementary school counseling programs. We promoted a successful amendment to the Juvenile Justice Bills expanding the role of school social workers in preventing school violence. A full page ad in *Role Call*, a Capitol Hill newspaper, which we co-sponsored during the juvenile justice debate, called for "improving the availability of mental health and counseling services" in schools, along with "common sense gun laws."

In the area of client and community concerns, NASW continues to support minimum wage increase legislation, and it has maintained participation in the National Committee on Pay Equity. Other areas of interest are hospital mergers and increasing the strength of consumers and advocates in health care delivery. We are in our third and final year of the federally funded HIV/AIDS Spectrum Project, which trains social workers in this critical area. We have held workshops throughout the country, most recently at both regional conferences in Los Angeles and New Orleans, and in Pennsylvania, California, Georgia, Iowa, and the Virgin Islands. Likewise, NASW's role in the government funded Adolescent Health Project took us to conferences with groups dealing with Native American, Latino, and African American children.

### **Image Enhancement**

Image enhancement is another NASW priority, increasing our ability to lobby, to affect social policy, and to improve communities. For instance, we have been working actively with the staff that produces the CBS television show "Judging Amy," which has led to the appearance of a positive and realistic social work character. "Judging Amy" is the first show with a social work character who truly captures the range of skills and the underlying purpose of professional social work, as well as the inherent ethical dilemmas that are faced. The producers have asked for ethical and practice guidance, real-life scenarios to assist with their scripts, and for some of our equipment to use as "props" and for set designs.

### **Political Action**

PACE, our political action arm, is one of our more important tools to improve the lives of professionals, clients, and communities. There was an extensive action campaign by PACE and our members in the recent general election. NASW expanded its bipartisan outreach and sponsored attendance at both Democratic and Republican fundraising events. We participate annually in Congressional Hispanic and Black Caucus Programs and maintain healthy relationships with the National Conference of Black State Legislators, Progressive Network, People for the American Way,

and the American Association of University Women. We developed outreach to state social work education programs, developed plans for the 2000 elections (including the presidential primaries), and researched legislators' voting records. PACE contributed to ten Senate candidates and twenty-six candidates for the U.S. House. Incumbent Congressional social workers received our support, as did two social worker Senate challenger candidates and one House social worker challenger.

NASW is affiliated with a group called Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities, led by five hundred corporate and military experts who advocate shifting unnecessary Cold War Pentagon spending to education and health care. Military, diplomatic, corporate, and foundation leaders participated, as did NEA and the National Council of Women's Organizations. We supported and assisted in collaborative videoconferences for grassroots and academic leaders from Northeast Puerto Rican and Latino communities, relating to federal policies that have an impact upon Latino children and families. All of these activities reflect an energetic and professional organization made up of dedicated social workers responding to the critical issues faced by the profession.

### **Conclusion**

Five years ago, I wrote a letter to the editor of my local newspaper. I have had several occasions to revisit that letter, and I would like to share part of it with you.

Will today's three-year-old child become a twenty-three-year-old who has been well educated, well prepared for work, for parenthood, and for citizenship? Have we created an environment which shows our children how much we care about them and about their futures? No, I do not think so.

These realities constitute demanding challenges

for us both as ordinary citizens and as individuals who have chosen social work as our profession. We have seen astounding progress in the development of the profession over the last one hundred years. In some ways, we seem to have come full circle in our concern for immigrant populations, the unemployed, and the homeless, and even the idea of the orphanage was recently resurrected. We have returned to respecting the role of communities and the importance of community development in addressing social problems. We allow ourselves to talk again about social class across racial and ethnic lines to see how disparities in economic and educational opportunities create tensions that reach explosive levels.

Where do we go from here? I once heard Toni Morrison give an address entitled "Future-Tense," a wonderful play on words. We know that the future will be tense. We also know that with tension comes opportunity. We have the opportunity to go back to the future, to rely on each other for support and growth, and to work one-on-one with children and families. We have the opportunity to go back to our grassroots communities or modern settlement houses, thinking and talking about community development. We have the opportunity to support our local divisions and chapters of NASW and to harness and take that strength to the National organization. This is the time when our program priorities and our NASW statements of social policy will reflect our renewed commitment to social change, social justice, and to ourselves as professional social workers.

As social work practitioners or as students we need to ensure that our practice wisdom influences our social service agencies, our schools of social work, and, more importantly, national and state level social policy. We must use a time like this to applaud ourselves for a job well-done and be mindful of our mission for the future. We must continue to support and to challenge each other as we continue our chosen work.