

## Chapter One OVERVIEW

What do social workers do? Ask this question of a group of social workers and one is likely to get a broad range of responses:

- a request to reiterate the question
- a description of the place or agency in which one works
- a description of the client population—“I work with homeless people”
- a job title—“I’m a case manager” or “I’m a therapist”
- a broad brush—“I’m a social worker”
- a description of rank or title—“I’m an executive director” or “I’m a supervisor”
- a description of interventions—“I practice psychotherapy.”

Why do social workers have a difficult time answering this question? One explanation is that social work, more than other professions, has expansive boundaries. Thus, the configuration of practice is affected by the setting of practice, area of practice, auspice of practice, characteristics of the presenting problems of clients, level of practice, and methodologies employed in practice. The configuration may vary from one social worker to another and change for the individual social worker over the course of his or her career. Because of the many variables that define the profession and practice of social work, it is often easier to explain where one works and with whom rather than what one does.

But the question remains: What do social workers actually do? This book examines what social workers do in their day-to-day work across the broad range of social work settings, levels of practice, and fields of practice (for example, aging, child welfare). The focus is on the roles and functions social workers assume in their work. An exploration of the activities in which social workers engage highlights the dynamism and vitality of the social work profession.

Social workers provide services in a variety of practice settings and at all levels of practice. For example, social workers deliver services in private practice, hospitals and health clinics, school systems, child welfare and mental health agencies, and correctional facilities.

Social work is a diverse profession with fluid boundaries. It is carried out, for example, in nonprofit medical, legal, and educational settings, in state and local governments, and in proprietary (for-profit) agencies. Social workers intervene with and on behalf of individuals, groups, and communities and provide preventative and ameliorative services. The clients represent all populations of our society—children, families, and adults—who have problems that run the gamut of the human condition from substance abuse to developmental disabilities.

Despite the long history of the profession in U.S. society, there is a scarcity of information devoted to the spectrum of career options with-

in the field of social work. In part, this is because social workers do so many different things in so many places. Although attorneys may specialize in tax law or family law, they tend to work in a firm, small group practice, or independent practice. Social workers, on the other hand, may specialize in one of many practice areas and practice their specialization in an even larger array of sites under public, for-profit, or not-for-profit auspices.

Social work is becoming increasingly specialized, and those considering a career in social work or those now enrolled in social work education programs may be confused about career options. Students frequently ask for information about the range of jobs open within social work. They know they want to be social workers, but generally do not have access to information about where the social work jobs are located and what different kinds of things social workers do in a variety of settings. Both those currently practicing social work (and perhaps wondering about other social work career options) and those interested in entering the profession will profit from a book devoted to exploring the diversity and commonalities that constitute the social work profession.

*What Social Workers Do* seeks to fill the void about the profession of social work by providing a panoramic look at the profession in action; offering practical information about the current status of the different service areas and the types of jobs available; making extensive use of case studies; and highlighting the intersection among practice functions (for example, direct practice, supervision, management, policy analysis), practice settings (for example, schools, courts, hospitals, private practice), and practice areas (for example, child welfare, mental health, substance abuse, employment related, and so forth). This approach demonstrates the unity of the profession and shows the connections among what appear to be diverse specializations.

## PURPOSES AND USES OF THIS BOOK

*What Social Workers Do* provides responses to a number of questions that are consistently posed by people interested in a career one of the helping professions, by students enrolled in social work programs, by practitioners in the field interested in knowing more about career paths within their profession, and by policymakers and government agencies that are responsible for establishing standards of care and requirements for professional credentialing and licensing. Questions include the following:

- Where do social workers work?
- What are the characteristics of the clients with whom social workers work?
- What kinds of problems do social workers address?
- How is the practice of social work influenced by larger sociopolitical developments?
- What impact does social work have on defining social problems and potential remedies?
- What are the different levels of social work practice?
- What technologies do social workers use?
- How fluid are social work careers both vertically and horizontally?
- In what ways do social workers interact with professionals in other disciplines?
- What career opportunities are available?
- What distinguishes social work from other helping professions?

These questions are addressed in this book through illustrative vignettes that highlight what social workers do across settings, practice areas, and levels of practice.

There are many audiences who will find the information contained in this volume to be of use. The book should provide a useful reference guide in high school and college libraries throughout the country to assist students who

are exploring career options. It can serve as an introductory text in BSW and MSW programs, particularly in courses that provide an overview of the profession of social work and the characteristics of social work practice. Similarly, the volume will be of interest to social work students and practitioners as a reference manual to guide career development. Social work educators will find the case studies useful in stimulating class discussions about situations that arise in practice. Agencies, schools, and practitioners will have a comprehensive resource by which to respond to requests for information about the profession.

## ORGANIZATION

The majority of social workers who are members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and from whom routine data are collected, work in the following areas of service:

- mental health
- health
- family and children's services
- aging and the elderly population
- schools
- substance use and abuse.

Earlier NASW categorizations were more far reaching and included crime, delinquency, and justice; developmental disabilities and mental retardation; and occupational and industrial services. These categories have been subsumed under more global areas of service because of the relatively small number of social workers who practice them.

The book is organized to reflect the major service areas delineated by NASW. An additional chapter focuses on other service areas that constitute long-standing important areas of practice, but in which relatively small numbers of social workers work. Finally, a chapter is devoted to a crosscutting area: *macro* social work practice. Here, attention is focused on social workers with functional responsibilities related

to community organization, policy development, implementation and evaluation, politics (including holding office and advocacy), mediation, and consultation.

The National Association of Social Workers has struggled for years to classify the social work labor force in a way readily understandable to its members, government, and the public at large, and in a way that accurately reflects the totality of the profession. *Person-in-environment*, the purview of social work, encompasses most of the human condition experienced by people individually and collectively. The complexities of this classification task are accepted as a given, and it is recognized that efforts to organize and categorize what social workers do are, to some extent, arbitrary.

There are many ways in which the organization of social work can be conceptualized:

- field of practice (for example, health, mental health)
- practice setting (for example, community mental health, schools, courts)
- agency type (for example, not-for-profit, government)
- functions performed (for example, direct services, supervision)
- client population served (for example, people who are homeless, children with learning disabilities, individuals with chronic mental illness)
- methods used (for example, social group work, casework, community work)
- practice goals (for example, prevention, problem resolution, symptom alleviation)
- services provided (for example, marital therapy, case management, discharge planning)
- type of presenting problem (for example, marital discord, depression, unemployment).

The breadth of the social work profession means that any classification of the field has inherent limitations. The service areas used by NASW for classification of its membership

and the literature of the profession also have limitations. Is homelessness, for example, a mental health problem, or a problem affecting families and children, or a community organization or housing problem? Are employee assistance programs components of mental health services, substance abuse services, or industrial social work?

The classifications of areas of service used by NASW highlight some of these dilemmas. For example, aging is considered a service area, but it is also a population group. Thus, in the chapter entitled “Aging”, the subject area is the population. Most other areas of service, such as health and mental health, across all population groups. Another service area is schools, but this also is one of the settings in which social workers practice. Mental health, or mental illness, refers to a population (people with mental illness), a range of social problems, and settings in which social workers practice (for example, community mental health centers). The areas of service are most notable for their overlap with practice settings, populations, and social problems. Thus, there is constant fluidity in conceptualization and categorization.

Within each of the areas of service listed, social workers occupy positions in direct services, supervision, and management. Also within each of the service areas, social workers may concentrate on certain targeted population groups, such as people with chronic mental illness and people who are homeless. Thus, an individual social worker may have a service area of mental health, occupy a supervisory position, and work on problems related to the homeless. And, of course, to add to the complexity, some service areas actually are special populations, for example, elderly people, and other service areas, such as schools, are also practice settings.

Social workers working in the defined areas of service deal with social issues that crosscut the broad spectrum of problems that affect individuals, groups, and communities within this society. These include civil and legal rights, economic status and poverty, employment, rural

and urban issues, and problems unique to special populations.

Each chapter includes a discussion of the range and types of practice areas within the category, nature and scope of the problems addressed in the particular area of service, enabling legislation and the programs that flow from laws. Vignettes illustrate the functions social workers carry out, as these are affected by the type and auspice of the employing agency, the position held by the social worker, and the characteristics of the clients served. The range of job opportunities in the areas of service are presented in sample classified advertisements abstracted from the *NASW News* (the newspaper of the National Association of Social Workers) between 1998 and 2002. The *NASW News* provides a national panorama of social work jobs rather than the (usually) local-based notices that appear in newspapers. These ads do not portray current listings to which readers may apply. Rather, they provide clues about the types of positions available to social workers, by area of practice, and the qualifications needed for them. The concluding chapter includes a discussion of the trends evident in social work practice and employment.

Information was derived from a number of sources. Publications of the National Association of Social Workers were relied as the “pulse” of the profession’s development. The *NASW News* provided a particularly rich source of material about what social workers do and the context in which they practice. All issues of the *NASW News* published between 1995 and early 2002 were reviewed, augmented for this same time period by a review of articles in *Social Work* as well as the 19th edition of the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (1995) and *Supplement* (1997) to gain a perspective on the growth and change experienced by the profession. Other references included textbooks and major social work journals used in graduate and undergraduate social work education programs that provided an overview of the profession and articles or chapters concerned with social work

areas of practice and functions carried out by professional social workers. Definitions were, for the most part, drawn from the *Social Work Dictionary* (Barker, 1999). In some cases, older literature, as used in the first edition of this book, is maintained as it continues to highlight salient points or historical trends.

In early 1995, when the first edition of *What Social Workers Do* was completed, the search for information involved extensive time in the library culling through the professional literature. In 2001 and the first half of 2002, the time frame in which this second edition was prepared, the impact of the information revolution became clear. With the click of the mouse, information was readily available. For example, updated information about the characteristics of the elderly population with whom social workers work was available within minutes by turning to the Web sites of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the National Institute on Aging, and the National Council on Aging. The use of an academic search engine—Proquest—allowed instant access to all major U.S. newspapers and revealed a plethora of stories about social workers, not only for the present time period, but also retroactively. The good news lies in the richness of the material now available to describe the functions and accomplishments of social workers. The daunting news lies in the need to sift through and cull out major themes that represent the totality of the profession.

The case studies exemplifying what social workers do are drawn from interviews, newspaper articles, and the *NASW News*. Many of the case studies are composites of real people and events. In some instances, the case studies portray actual people or events, and these are so noted. In these instances of real people and situations, there is a bias toward portraying what social workers do in the northeast corridor of the United States. Although unintentional, this bias is hopefully understandable. Because the author lives and works in the northeast, many case situations were drawn from the immediate environment.

All references were selected because of their relevance to understanding what social workers do and the types of issues they confront in their work. Therefore, however worthy, literature pertaining to diagnosis and assessment; treatment approaches and modalities; dynamics of interventions, social programs, or program development; staff development; the nature of social problems and policy or practice options; special populations; evaluation of services; or theoretical constructs per se is generally not included. The exception is literature pertaining to social work functions that may also touch some or all of the areas mentioned earlier.

The sequence of chapters reflects the primacy of the area of service within the social work profession as reflected in the NASW membership; for example, mental health is the first chapter because the largest proportion of NASW members are employed within this area. Similarly, “A Potpourri of Areas of Service” appears toward the end of the volume, as the service areas reflected in this catchall category represent only a very small proportion of the NASW membership. In the first edition, statistics regarding the proportion of NASW members in each service area were drawn from *Who We Are: The Social Work Labor Force as Reflected in the NASW Membership* (Gibelman & Schervish, 1993). For this second edition, data were drawn from *Who We Are: A Second Look* (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997). The ranking of areas of service by proportion of NASW members remains consistent.

Any effort to define what social workers do must indicate the limitations of that endeavor. The social work profession is broader than most professions in regard to types of problems social workers address, settings in which social workers work, levels of practice, interventions used, and populations served. The scope of social work practice has always been wide, and its boundaries continue to expand. *What Social Workers Do* attempts to highlight what social workers do within the context of a highly diverse and ever-evolving profession.

## REFERENCES

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