



A Strategic Plan to Increase the Flow of Minority, Bilingual and Culturally Competent Professional Social Workers into California's Mental Health System:

REPORT ON SOURCES OF FINANCIAL AID FOR SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS IN MENTAL HEALTH

POLICY BRIEF

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Under the direction of:

James Midgley, Ph.D.

Harry and Riva Specht Professor
School of Social Welfare
University of California, Berkeley

Edward Cohen, Ph.D.

Director, Center for Social Services Research
School of Social Welfare
University of California, Berkeley

The shortage of diverse, bilingual and culturally competent mental health personnel to staff California's community mental health services system is widely recognized. A major challenge in recruiting students into professional education is the high cost of professional education. Due to the modest salaries paid by social agencies, many graduates end up burdened with significant educational loans which may take years to repay. This policy brief describes the need for funding sources for students pursuing careers in mental health and then presents a summary of funding sources currently available to these students as well as those being planned for the future. Two primary types of funding for social work students were identified: stipend and loan forgiveness programs. Potential funding sources were identified through Web and documentary research and interviews with key informants.

THE NEED FOR FUNDING

California's mental health system is facing a severe shortage of professionally qualified social workers, particularly those who are minority, bilingual and culturally competent. This need was acknowledged by the California Legislature, which passed a resolution in 2003 requesting that California's schools of social work increase their enrollment. The primary challenge in meeting this goal is lack of funding. Increased enrollment will necessitate greater funding for programs, in order to facilitate expansion. Accordingly, this report summarizes sources of support for students in social work educational programs,

particularly in the field of community mental health.

STIPEND PROGRAMS

Often funded through public sources, or from foundations or nongovernmental organizations, stipends programs can meet work force needs by addressing staff shortages in particular fields. Stipends are educational awards that assist with educational costs such as tuition, books and living expenses. These awards are provided on the condition that students work for a stipulated period of time in an approved agency providing services in the student's field of specialization.

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This “payback requirement” is usually of proportionate length to the period of the stipend award, so that two years of stipend support will usually require two years of full-time employment. There may also be additional conditions, such as requiring that the student work in an underserved geographic area or with a particular population. Students who fail to perform adequately or who drop out of a stipend program are required to pay back the funds they have received.

Title IV-E Child Welfare Training Stipend

A federal funding stream (through the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980-PL 96-272) provides “Title IV-E” stipends to support social work students specializing in child welfare. In California, funding is channeled through the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC), a consortium of the state’s schools of social work, county social services, mental health agencies and foundations. The goal of the Title IV-E program is to increase the number of professionally qualified social workers in public child welfare agencies and develop a workforce that reflects the state’s diverse demography. Use of funds is restricted to social workers providing foster care services.

Currently each school in the CalSWEC consortium is allocated 40 child welfare stipends. Full-time graduate students receive a stipend of \$18,500 per annum for two years and are required to work in a child welfare agency for two years after graduation. The stipend is used by students to cover the costs of tuition and related educational expenses. Recently, the program was expanded to cover undergraduate and part-time students. Statistics gathered by CalSWEC indicate that Title IV-E graduates are beginning to mirror California’s population in ethnicity and languages spoken.

California Mental Health Services Act Stipend

The Title IV-E model was used by the California Department of Mental Health to shape its own stipend program funded through the Mental Health Services Act of 2004. Stipends are a key strategy to meeting the goal of training more mental health social workers. CalSWEC administers the stipend program through a cooperative agreement with the Department of Mental Health.

All 17 schools in the CalSWEC consortium currently participate in the stipend program. Each school is allocated a certain number of stipends for full-time second year Master of Social Work students, based on an assessment of the school’s capacity to train students in mental health social work. Students receive an award of \$18,500 on condition that they complete coursework in community mental health, undertake a fieldwork placement in a community mental health setting and agree to work for a minimum of one year in a community mental health setting. The term “community mental health setting” is defined as a county mental health services agency or a nonprofit mental health agency contracting with a county agency. Data on the Fall 2006 cohort of stipend awardees demonstrates that a sizable number of minority and bilingual students have enrolled in the program. The largest minority group was Hispanic/Chicano/Latino, at 25 percent, followed by Asian/Pacific Islander at 19 percent, and then by African American at 10 percent. The majority of recipients spoke more than one language (59 percent), with Spanish as the most common (35 percent). These findings support the proposition that stipend programs are an effective means of recruiting minority and bilingual social work students for future careers in community mental health.

Health Professions Education Foundation

(The Allied Healthcare Scholarship)

The Health Professions Education Foundation administers the Allied Healthcare Scholarship, funded by a grant from Kaiser Permanente. The purpose of the Allied Healthcare Scholarship Program is to increase the number of trained allied health care professionals (including social workers), and to encourage them to practice in direct patient care in medically underserved areas in California. Graduates and undergraduates in social work programs are encouraged to apply. Eligible applicants receive up to \$2,500 per year, and must complete a service obligation of one year or 100-150 hours of volunteer service in a designated medically underserved area. While the program lost funding in the fall of 2006, it will be funded again in the fall of 2007.

AmeriCorps

Part of the federal Corporation for National Service, the AmeriCorps program is a federally funded service program that provides volunteers with educational vouchers in return for periods of community service. One of its programs, Students in Service, has the goal of supporting and promoting the engagement of higher education students in their communities by offering education awards to those who participate in community service, service-learning or civic engagement activities. The program is operated by the California Campus Compact (CACC) at participating member schools and universities nationwide. Provider agencies contract to manage the program in different localities and must put up a match for vouchers and operational costs as well as hire full-time staff.

To be eligible for the Students in Service program, students must be at least 18 years old and enrolled

in a higher education institution that is a member of CACC. Participants engage in a specific number of community service hours at an approved site, and in exchange receive a voucher commensurate to the time commitment (e.g., a \$1,000 voucher for 300 hours of service). The award or voucher may be redeemed up to seven years after the service is completed to pay for expenses such as tuition, room and board, books, supplies and transportation. Qualifying service falls into five focus areas: education, the environment, human needs, public safety and homeland security. Students may not be qualified for the program if they receive remuneration for their service (with the exception of federal work study positions, which qualify) or if they have previously received AmeriCorps funding. While highly appropriate for social work students, who are required to complete a field practicum, the program is currently utilized by only three California schools of social work.

Work Release Programs

While technically not stipends, work release programs can offer support through continuation of partial or full salaries while employees acquire educational qualifications that the employer deems appropriate. Programs vary in terms of the amount of funding offered and amount of time permitted for educational activities, as well as whether additional supports such as grants for tuition or books are offered. Such programs generally require that recipients return to work for the employer for a specified “payback” period. One example of a successful work release program is the 20/20 Upgrade Training Program at the Riverside County Department of Mental Health. The program’s goal is to enhance recruitment, promotion and retention of clinical social work staff by supporting the educational advancement of current staff with bachelor’s degrees. Selected applicants receive a full paycheck and benefits

while working 20 hours a week during the academic year and attending school, and working full-time during summer and other breaks. Students may enter the M.S.W. program at California State University San Bernardino or Loma Linda University. Upon completion of their studies, students are expected to work for the department for a specified amount of time, or they will be responsible for repayment.

LOAN REIMBURSEMENT PROGRAMS

Loan reimbursement/forgiveness programs are an important source of financial aid to the great majority of social work students who secure low-interest, governmental loans to fund their college education and subsequently graduate with sizable debts. These programs allow graduates to repay educational loans by working in a designated field or area of service after graduation for a specified period of time. Programs vary with regards to the amount of repayment and the service requirements. Both federal and state programs available to social work graduates in community mental health are reviewed next.

National Health Service Corps Loan Repayment Program

The National Health Service Corps Loan Repayment Program (NHSC LRP) was created by the federal government in 1970 to address the shortage of health care professionals working in the nation's rural areas. Medical professionals can enroll in the program and practice in health care facilities designated as Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs), and, in turn, have a portion or all of their educational loans forgiven. Licensed social workers may qualify for the program if they meet the following requirements: 1) have a master's or doctoral degree in social work from a school accredited by the Council on Social Work Education

(CSWE); 2) have completed two years post-graduate supervised clinical experience; 3) have passed the ASWB Clinical Exam; and 4) are able to practice independently and unsupervised as a licensed clinical social worker. Participants of the program must sign a contract agreeing to provide a minimum of two years of full-time clinical service. In return, eligible social workers receive an amount of up to \$50,000 which may be used to repay educational loans (federal, state or commercial).

The California Healthcare Work Force and Community Development State Loan Repayment Program

Similar to the National Health Service Corps program, the California Healthcare Work force and Community Development State Loan Repayment Program has the goal of supplying underserved areas with trained health care professionals. As with the federal program, underserved areas are specifically designated by the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development Healthcare Work force. Holders of the California clinical social work license (LCSW) are eligible for the program. In order to qualify for loan repayment, recipients must work full-time at a designated site for a minimum of two consecutive years and a maximum of four consecutive years. In selecting applicants, particular importance is placed on cultural and bilingual competencies, making this program an excellent tool to recruit bilingual social workers into community mental health.

Perkins Loan Forgiveness Program

The Federal Perkins Loan is a low-interest (5%) loan for undergraduate and graduate students with exceptional financial need at participating universities. Total funding available under the program is \$4,000 each year for undergraduates (up to a maximum of \$20,000) and \$6,000 each

year for graduate or professional students (up to a maximum of \$40,000, including any Federal Perkins Loans borrowed as an undergraduate). Under the Individuals with Disabilities Act, a portion or total amount of a student's loan may be forgiven if they work in education, Head Start, early intervention, nursing, law enforcement, child or family services, or military service, with repayment commensurate with length of employment. Although not specifically designed for mental health social work graduates, those who work in public or private nonprofit agencies providing services to high-risk children and their families may be eligible for loan forgiveness.

National Institute of Health-General Research Loan Repayment Program

While not intended for practitioners, funding for doctoral student research is mentioned here due to the need for minorities and bilingual social work students in mental health research. This program, administered by the National Institute of Health, is intended to encourage highly qualified health professionals, particularly physicians, to conduct research in pressing health issues. Applicants must possess a doctoral degree and devote 50 percent or more of their time to research funded by a non-profit organization or government entity. They must also have an educational loan debt equal to or exceeding 20 percent of the cost of their education. Currently, preference is given to those undertaking research in the areas of pediatrics, contraception, infertility and health disparities. Given the urgent need for additional research into health disparities, doctoral graduates in social work who undertake research in this area are well placed to apply for the National Institutes of Health's loan reimbursement program.

OTHER AND PENDING PROGRAMS

In addition to the programs already reviewed, several initiatives related to student financial aid are currently in the planning or implementation process. They will augment the programs currently available and provide additional sources of financial aid to students pursuing careers in community mental health.

California Licensed Mental Health Services Provider Education Programs

The Licensed Mental Health Service Provider Education Program was established in 2003 as a loan reimbursement program for licensed clinical social workers, educational psychologists, and marriage and family therapists who commit in writing to work for a minimum of one year in a publicly funded mental health facility or a mental health professional shortage area as defined by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The loan repayment program is not yet operational but will begin receiving applications in September 2007.

Mental Health Services Act Loan Forgiveness Program

As part of the Mental Health Services Act's focus on training and education, the California Mental Health Planning Council and the Department of Mental Health are in the process of developing a loan forgiveness program which will, in all likelihood, also be available to social work students pursuing a professional education in community mental health. However, as of January 2007, terms of the program and whether it will replace the mental health stipend program are still unclear.

Medicaid

A study is currently underway by CalSWEC to determine the possibility of using Medicaid funds to assist in the training of public agency social workers who work with aged Medicaid clients. It is possible that training expenses can be claimed for employees who provide social services to Medicaid eligible clients. Mental health social workers who work with Medicaid eligible clients may also receive funding through Medicaid to fund their training of workers. As yet, no conclusions on this initiative have been reached.

Child Protective Services Student Loan Forgiveness Act & WE CARE Kids

Two initiatives to increase the number of bicultural social workers were introduced to the California legislature, both focused in part on loan forgiveness for child welfare workers. Unfortunately, both pieces of legislation never became law.

CSWE Fellowship Program

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), a nonprofit national association representing more than 3,000 individual members as well as graduate and undergraduate programs of professional social work education, administers two fellowship programs to increase the number of minority doctoral students who specialize in mental health research: the Mental Health and Substance Abuse Fellowship Program (MHSAFP) funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; and the Under-Represented Mental Health Research Fellowship Program (UMHRFP), funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. Both fellowships share the goal of educating ethnic minority social work professionals to provide leadership in mental health research and the delivery of mental health and substance abuse services. Applicants must meet the following

criteria: U.S. citizen, national, or resident; member of minority ethnic/racial group; master's degree in social work; enrolled as a full-time student in a doctoral social work program; potential for leadership and academic success; and commitment to a career in mental health and substance abuse service for minorities. Fellows are expected to develop dissertations relevant to mental health in minority populations. Stipend support of \$20,722 is offered for one to three years, with restrictions placed on outside funding and employment.

CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

It is clear that financial aid to attract minority and bilingual students to social work programs in community mental health is available. However, information about these sources of aid is not widely known and these programs are underutilized. Greater efforts must be made to disseminate information about financial aid sources and assist students with applying for financial aid. While the Title IV-E and mental health stipend programs have fostered the view that government stipends are the best way fund students in areas of work force needs, these programs are available to only a portion of students who will enter these fields and other funding mechanisms such as loan forgiveness must also be considered to meet student financial need.

Initiatives to increase awareness and to improve access to financial aid are needed. Schools of social work should assist their students by putting together financial aid information packets and should stress the importance of accessing multiple sources of aid. On a state level, a comprehensive plan should be developed for securing steady financial support for mental health students. To inform such a plan, more research is needed on ways students currently access aid, how

schools assist them, and how effective different sources of aid are in meeting their needs and securing a long-term commitment to practice in community mental health. The new mental health stipend program is an opportunity to ask these pressing questions and devise comprehensive solutions for the recruitment and retention of minority, bilingual and culturally competent social workers for California's community mental health system.

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Under the direction of:

Center for Social Services Research

School of Social Welfare

University of California at Berkeley

120 Haviland Hall

Berkeley CA 94720

510.642.1899

<http://cssr.berkeley.edu/>

Funded by:

The California Endowment

1000 N. Alameda Street

Los Angeles, CA 90012

800.449.4149

www.calendow.org

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