



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

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

POLICY BRIEF

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*Under the direction of:*

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The shortage of diverse, bilingual and culturally competent mental health personnel able to staff California's community mental health services is widely recognized. This policy brief reviews a number of published studies dealing with the need for bilingual and culturally competent social workers able to practice in the state's community mental health system. It reviews the literature on the current deployment and future need for mental health social workers in California and discusses barriers and potential strategies for recruiting and retaining a culturally diverse mental health social work work force. A number of literature sources have been consulted, including governmental and foundation reports. Reference is also made to studies that do not deal with California specifically but that address issues concerning the shortage of social workers at the national level.

**CURRENT DEPLOYMENT OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN CALIFORNIA'S MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM**

Many studies have found that California has a shortage of social workers in general and licensed mental health social workers in particular. In 2000, the ratio of mental health and substance abuse social workers to the general population was 13 to 100,000, less than half the national ratio of 28.3 to 100,000.<sup>1</sup>

A statewide survey of vacant social work positions across all fields found a vacancy rate of 9.4 percent.<sup>2</sup> This compares to a vacancy rate of 17.1 percent in community mental health centers and hospitals, and a 24.3 percent vacancy rate for Licensed

Clinical Social Workers (LCSWs) in mental health.<sup>3</sup> The trend in California parallels the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) forecast of impending shortages of licensed social workers, particularly in the fields of gerontology and children and families, for the nation as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

Due to scanty research on the social work labor force, the true incidence of the problem is unknown. This is in part because the variance in application of the term "social worker" for a range of educational backgrounds and employment positions.<sup>5</sup> Though a high number

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of students complete bachelor's degrees in social work or related disciplines, relatively few continue to graduate school.<sup>6</sup> Social workers without a master's degree may be limited in their skill, job flexibility, compensation and career advancement potential.

The lack of qualified social workers has been recognized by California legislators, particularly for the areas of mental health, gerontology and child welfare. Senate Bill 2030 required a study of the child welfare system's workload, and the final report in 2000 found that the current work force was insufficient to meet minimum federal and state requirements.<sup>7</sup> In 2003, the legislature adopted a resolution requesting that California's schools of social work and the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) review the shortfall of qualified social workers and take steps to increase the enrollment of social work students into professional programs.<sup>8</sup>

Given California's demographics, the need for ethnic minority and bilingual social workers is particularly acute. People of color make up more than half the population,<sup>9</sup> yet national statistics indicate that the great majority of social workers and psychologists are Caucasian.<sup>10</sup> The inadequate representation of African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos in the mental health labor force may inhibit health seeking among racial and ethnic minority populations and contribute to well-documented health disparities between Caucasians and racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>11</sup>

As Californians become more diverse they are also aging, and evidence suggests that there are not enough social workers with training in gerontology to respond to the growing population of elders. Approximately 20 percent of adults age 55 and over

have a mental illness.<sup>12</sup> Lack of qualified applicants for vacant positions was the most cited barrier to staffing gerontological social work positions.<sup>13</sup> There are some hopeful signs that recruitment of minorities in social work is on the rise. In NASW's survey of licensed social workers, younger professionals (under 30) were more likely to be of a minority ethnicity than the general population.<sup>14</sup> Recent enrollment figures for social work education programs have demonstrated an increase among students of color.<sup>15</sup> This trend is apparent in California, as the majority of students enrolled in California State University Bachelor of Social Work programs between Fall 2000-2003 were ethnic minorities.<sup>16</sup> These figures indicate interest in social work among minorities can be nurtured to build a more ethnically diverse workforce.

#### **FUTURE NEED FOR A CULTURALLY DIVERSE SOCIAL WORK MENTAL HEALTH WORKFORCE**

The future need for mental health social workers hinges on overcoming the current shortage. Many of the issues outlined above that contribute to a current deficit in supply of social workers, such as growing proportions of aging and ethnically diverse populations, are expected to increase in the next decade. In 2004, the U.S. Department of Labor estimated that the need for social workers would increase 18-26 percent by 2014.<sup>17</sup> The need in California was estimated to grow 16-30 percent between 2001-2010.<sup>18</sup>

Several additional factors may contribute to increased demand. These include decreased stigma about mental illness and treatment, continued fragmentation of the system, which encourages duplication of service, and growth of mental health parity laws and policies that seek to increase access to services (such as the California Mental Health Services Act).<sup>19</sup> Finally, as the population as a whole

ages, so do health professionals, many of whom may be retiring in the next decade.<sup>20</sup> Thirty percent of mental health and substance abuse social workers are over age 55.<sup>21</sup> The retirement rates of health services professionals are expected to exceed the capacity for professional schools to train workers to replace them.

At the same time, it is possible that need for mental health professionals could decrease or remain constant. Continued or increased provision of mental health services by primary care physicians, development of early intervention models for mental illness, decreased substance abuse or growth of paraprofessional mental health training programs could curb or even decrease the demand for mental health professionals in California.<sup>22</sup>

## RECRUITMENT OF CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS TO SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMS FOR MENTAL HEALTH

### *Barriers to Recruitment of Ethnic and Minority Students*

Despite the need for a diverse social work workforce, multiple barriers inhibit recruitment of diverse students in the health professions, including mental health social work.<sup>23</sup> Many students of color may have full-time jobs, families to support and other obligations that make full-time attendance in a graduate program unfeasible.<sup>24</sup> Licensure requirements in California inhibit the relocation of qualified social workers from other states and countries, as only individuals with degrees from accredited American universities and experience supervised by an LCSW are eligible, though the licensing board is currently addressing licensure reciprocity with other states.<sup>25</sup>

Financing higher education is likely to be the most serious barrier to recruitment of culturally diverse students in social work. In the last several years, tuition at the Universities of California and the

California State Universities has increased, while federal financial aid funds have decreased, presenting a significant obstacle to racial and ethnic minority students who are interested in pursuing higher education.<sup>26</sup> These problems are compounded by the fact that social work salaries are lower than for many other professions, thus making student loans a less attractive option for educational funding.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the majority of social work programs are full-time, hindering income supplementation through employment.

High school students' lack of preparation for postsecondary education is also an important factor in inhibiting recruitment. In 2003, California ranked ninth from the bottom among U.S. states in the percentage of the population age 25 and over with a high school diploma. Slightly more than 80 percent of residents had a diploma,<sup>28</sup> making for a smaller pool of those who can participate in the postsecondary education required for social work positions. Among those students who complete high school and go on to college, educational disparities exist between African American or Hispanic students and Caucasian and Asian students.<sup>29</sup> Preparedness is a special challenge for students who speak English as a second language; these students may have been focused on gaining English competency in high school and college and feel unprepared for conducting research or writing analytical papers.<sup>30</sup>

A sociopolitical environment that is hostile to addressing racial and ethnic disparities in education, health and social services, coupled with multiple group-specific cultural considerations, also present challenges to attracting students to social work programs. Negative experiences with social services system as youth may act as a deterrent for considering a social work career, as may the

relatively low status and pay of the profession.<sup>31</sup> Proposition 209 and other initiatives to limit affirmative action have created what is perceived by some as a hostile environment toward race and ethnicity-based considerations in admissions.<sup>32</sup> Group-specific cultural norms and preferences may influence students' decisions to pursue careers in social work. Asian/Pacific Islander students in one study reported that social work is seen as a low-status occupation in their culture, and Latino and African-American students described the negative image of social workers in their communities, whose role may be perceived as breaking up families.<sup>33</sup>

#### *Promising Practices for Increasing Recruitment of Ethnic and Minority Students into Social Work Programs*

The literature suggests that exposing and preparing young people for the social work profession in middle and high school is a promising strategy for increasing recruitment of ethnic and racial minority students.<sup>34</sup> Early preparation initiatives, known as pipeline programs, typically include three main components: 1) efforts to increase awareness of mental health professions, 2) specific age-appropriate curriculum related to mental health professions and 3) school-industry partnerships to encourage real-life career exploration and help students develop connections in the field. Model human service academies with mental health components have been established in Los Angeles Unified School District at Amador Valley High School in Pleasanton, Calif., and at Oakland Technical High School. Limited evidence suggests that these programs have been successful in attracting ethnic and minority students to human services.<sup>35</sup>

Increasing access to higher education goes hand-in-hand with early preparation. Efforts to recruit and retain student of color at the community college level are critical to increasing the diversity of the

social work mental health workforce. Promising practices at the community college level include establishment of certificate programs for psychosocial rehabilitation counselors and mental health behavioral specialists, distance learning programs, and web-based learning modules.<sup>36</sup>

Once students are ready for and interested in pursuing a career in mental health social work, strategies for increasing access to higher education are needed to help students overcome barriers described in the previous section. Necessary supports include financial aid, services for students who speak English as a second language, support for students with family caregiving commitments, ethnic minority mentors and flexible programming for working students<sup>37</sup>. Specific suggestions for expanding financial aid include loan forgiveness programs, expansion of Title IV-E and scholarships.<sup>38</sup> Students who speak English as a second language may require tutoring to support them in managing the dual tasks of becoming proficient in English and developing a new knowledge base.<sup>39</sup> Students with caregiving responsibilities, and those who are working while in school, may benefit from part-time programs, subsidized child care and opportunities to interact with peers who are also working or parenting.<sup>40</sup>

Schools of social work need to implement targeted recruitment strategies to expand minority enrollment, per the Master Plan for Social Work Education in the State of California, which will require these schools to expand. Additional funding could create additional full-time student slots, and schools can also expand enrollment by introducing part-time programs.<sup>41</sup> In addition to expansion of existing accredited social work programs, serious consideration should be given to nonaccredited social work programs, which produce graduates with similar training and skills.<sup>42</sup> These schools

may be instrumental in increasing the numbers of qualified, diverse mental health social workers.

## RETENTION OF ETHNIC AND MINORITY SOCIAL WORK MENTAL HEALTH SPECIALISTS IN THE WORKFORCE

### *Challenges to Retaining a Culturally Diverse Social Work Labor Force*

Beyond recruitment, the diversity of the workforce is threatened by burnout among trained and experienced ethnic minority social workers. Difficulty retaining qualified staff is a problem that plagues many professions in the field of human services. The main factors contributing to staff burnout are poor pay, lack of supervision and support, inadequate training, limited advancement opportunities and rule-bound jobs that preclude creativity and entrepreneurship.<sup>43</sup> These are problems across ethnic groups, but are particularly acute in reference to minorities, already a limited pool.

Human services workers are paid less than workers in other fields at comparable levels and with comparable skills.<sup>44</sup> This stems from the conditions regulating the system: unlike the market sector, human services, as a field controlled by government through statutes and regulations, is not subject to the same forces of supply and demand. The reported high demand for qualified social workers does not appear to positively affect wages and professions with similar skills command significantly higher salaries, demonstrating the lack of market influence on social work jobs.<sup>45</sup>

Human services is a challenging field with heavy caseloads and high responsibility, as well as bureaucratic oversight that imposes burdens and limits creative social work practice. Many workers cite a lack of supervision, support and training to deal with the stress and difficulty of their jobs.

The training and supervision that is offered more often has to do with compliance on administrative procedures than support and skills building.<sup>46</sup> For example, a work force study found that in child welfare services, heavy caseloads are the norm. This leaves workers with too little time to spend per case and therefore even less for supervision, training and other important tasks.<sup>47</sup> Challenging work conditions often result in staff who leave their jobs rather than remaining in the field to work their way up the ranks.<sup>48</sup>

### *Promising Practices for Retaining Culturally Diverse Social Work Mental Health Specialists*

The literature shows that social workers and policymakers have proposed several ideas to improve retention in mental health and other fields of social work. Social workers suggest increased pay and flexible work schedules as incentives, as well as special considerations for bilingual workers. Training in cultural competence for managers and opportunities for career advancement may also improve retention.<sup>49</sup> Policymakers advocate a number of strategies, including increased training, stipends for interns, loan forgiveness/tuition assistance, established social work career ladders, enforcement of reasonable caseloads standards, reduction in administrative work, provision of adequate resources for training and establishment of supervisor training standards in public social service agencies.<sup>50</sup>

One current method available for recruiting and retaining mental health professionals in underserved areas is the "Mental Health Professional Shortage Area Designation" (MHPSA). Applications for shortage designations can be made for eligible geographic areas, population groups and facilities. Counties may use this designation to request personnel placement through the National Health

Service Corps and offer enrollment in the Federal Loan Repayment Program. The program may help to attract qualified candidates who might not otherwise have considered working in small counties. However, available funding is insufficient for the number of eligible applicants, hindering the effectiveness of this strategy.<sup>51</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The recently passed Mental Health Services Act has the potential to initiate innovative mental health services and address unmet mental health needs among ethnic and racial minorities.<sup>52</sup> Counties and their contracted provider agencies will require additional staff for newly developed services targeted towards underserved populations, which includes minority consumers and those with limited or no English language ability.

Where will the trained mental health providers come from to staff these programs? Even among existing mental health programs providing mental health services to ethnic and bilingual populations, there are serious difficulties in hiring qualified staff. This literature review documented the current and future need for more culturally diverse mental health social workers and summarized many of the strategies for addressing the shortage. Through collaborations between educational institutions, social work agencies, policymakers and funders, we can increase the number and quality of culturally diverse social workers and begin to close the gap in mental health disparities.

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