

## Social Workers in California's Public Aging Services: Implications for State Policies and Programs

*Andrew Scharlach, Jaimie L. Simon, and Teresa S. Dal Santo*

Rapid increases in the size and diversity of the elderly population have prompted concerns regarding the adequacy of existing human and social resources for meeting the increasing demands of older people. According to the 2000 U.S. census, people over the age of 65 make up 13% of the country's population, and are expected to reach 21% by 2040.

California has the largest population of people over 65 years of age in the United States, and its diversity is surpassed only by Hawaii's. The number of Californians over age 65 is currently more than 3.5 million, and is estimated to increase by 172% over the next 40 years. These figures are causing concern among administrators, practitioners, and users of aging services regarding the sufficiency of such services, and the availability, adequacy, and training of personnel providing them.

### The Role of Social Work

Increasing numbers of older adults have physical disabilities, cognitive impairments, or mental illness. Of particular concern are the elderly with complex conditions marked by chronic physical or mental-health problems, multiple simultaneous disease processes, and problematic personal, interpersonal, social, and economic situations. These complex conditions warrant comprehensive multidimensional assessments; coordination of care, including assistance accessing and paying for services; and efforts to increase an individual's independence—a combination of services often provided by social workers and typically described as case management.

Case management has been shown to be effective in helping disabled elderly individuals. Recipients are less likely to require institutional care, and often ex-

perience an improved quality of life. Case management also results in reduced strain among family caregivers.

Research suggests that case management is best provided by experienced professionals such as masters-trained social workers. Aging-services workers who lack professional training and skills may neglect essential aspects of assessment and case management, such as client self-determination and related ethical issues, which could result in poor planning for care.

Case management is particularly important for older adults who are victims of abuse and neglect. The 1998 passage of California Senate Bill 2199 introduced mandatory procedures for reporting elder abuse, resulting in an increased demand for county adult-protective services (APS) and requiring a near doubling of APS positions in some counties. Because social workers have had specific training regarding the assessment and treatment of resistant clients and pathological family dynamics, they are apt to be especially effective in responding to elder abuse and neglect.

Moreover, social workers have a set of distinct professional values and ethics, including mutual responsibility, confidentiality, and self-determination, that are essential for resolving the ethical challenges that are typically involved when the elderly face abuse, neglect, or other complex physical, psychological, or social vulnerabilities.

### A Critical Shortage?

Unfortunately, the existing workforce of social workers is inadequate to help the growing numbers of elderly people who need adult protective services or other



types of case management. The National Institute on Aging estimates that 60,000 to 70,000 social workers are currently needed to provide services to older adults.

Furthermore, although more than half of the 155,000 members of the National Association of Social Workers indicate that gerontological knowledge is necessary in their positions, only about 5,000 members currently claim aging as their primary field of practice.

Future prospects do not look any better. Nationally, only about 3% of social-work students specialize in geriatric social work during their MSW training, and only another 2% take any classes in social work with older adults. This lack of professionally trained social workers with gerontological knowledge and skills is apt to have a potentially negative impact on the ability of county governments and other providers of aging services to meet the needs of an aging society.

### **Statewide Needs Survey**

In an effort to examine the unique personnel needs of California's large and highly diverse elderly population, the Center for the Advanced Study of Aging Services at the University of California, Berkeley, with support from UC's California Policy Research Center, conducted a statewide survey of public aging-services personnel.

The questions were designed to identify the characteristics of aging-services personnel in public agencies in California, as well as current barriers to hiring sufficient numbers of professionally trained social workers in aging services. The survey examined current worker characteristics; hiring practices; barriers to hiring qualified workers; and implications for social-work services, public programs, and training and education.

The survey was distributed to all California directors of Area Agencies on Aging or county departments of adult and aging services. Responses were received from 55 of the 76 (72%) possible respondents, including 10 of the 18 (56%) freestanding AAAs, 32 of the 43 (74%) freestanding county departments of adult and aging services, and 13 of the 15 (87%) county departments co-located with AAAs.

### **Survey Findings**

The survey responses revealed tremendous variation in the types of programs offered and the number of masters-trained social workers employed in the vari-

ous programs. Of the 55 responding agencies, 78% included an Adult Protective Services program, 82% offered In-Home Support Services (in-home care such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, or personal care, as well as accompaniment to medical appointments so that clients can remain in their own homes), 40% provided case management (e.g., Multipurpose Senior Services and Linkages programs, which provide comprehensive case management to assist disabled adults and frail elderly persons to avoid institutionalization), and 56% provided information and referral or other programs, such as financial assistance, housing assistance, mental-health services, senior employment, and public guardian.

*Significant shortage of professionally trained social workers among the state's public aging-services personnel.* In adult protective services, where advanced assessment and intervention skills are needed, only 42% of the workers had an MSW; among other case-management programs, 36% of workers had an MSW. Fewer than 12% of workers in various other programs (e.g., mental health, information and referral, In-Home Support Services) had an MSW.

The lack of masters-level experience and training among aging-services workers was further demonstrated by the MSW requirements of vacant positions. Respondents reported that an MSW was required for only 35% of current APS vacancies and only 50% of vacant case-management positions. An MSW was not required for any of the vacancies in IHSS, information and referral, or other programs.

*Need for increased numbers of Latino social workers.* Fifty percent of aging-services personnel were non-Hispanic whites, while the remaining personnel were distributed among other ethnic groups as follows: African American (14%), Asian American (13%), Hispanic (18%), Native American (<1%), Pacific Islander (2%), and other (2%). This distribution corresponds closely to the 2000 census figures on the racial and ethnic composition of the state's overall population for non-Hispanic whites, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders.

However, African Americans, who represent 6.2% of the state's population, were overrepresented in this sample, while Hispanics, who make up 28.1% of the general population, were underrepresented.

*Lack of educated and trained applicants are key barriers to filling vacant positions.* When asked to identify

the greatest barriers to hiring aging-services personnel, 72% of respondents cited a lack of qualified and properly educated applicants; 70% cited inadequate salaries in aging services; 40% cited insufficient numbers of ethnically diverse applicants; 32% cited the high cost of living in the area; and 23% cited difficult working conditions.

### **Policy Recommendations**

*Deploy professionally trained social workers where they are most needed.* Professionally trained social workers are uniquely well-suited to provide case management to assist elderly persons with elder abuse and other complex situations. However, California's aging services currently are not organized in a manner that assures either case management for elderly people with complex conditions or the provision of case management by professionally trained social workers.

The state's public aging services would benefit from a hierarchical approach, whereby case management would be available for that small group of elderly and disabled individuals who most need it. Senate Bill 953 (Vasconcellos, enacted as the California Integrated Elder Care and Involvement Act of 2002), for example, envisions a care-coordination system that combines the CalCareNet electronic resources databank with care coordinators known as Care Navigators. The act identifies four levels of assistance: information only; information and referral; short-term care coordination; and case management. Case management would be reserved for individuals in need of ongoing assistance, provided by MSSP, Linkages, or other similar case-management programs.

This would require substantial increases in the numbers of social workers available to staff such programs throughout the state so that all people who need this level of assistance may access these services, as well as increases in the numbers of paraprofessionals trained to provide less-intensive information and referral services and short-term care coordination.

*Increase the number of professionally trained social workers and paraprofessionals with expertise in aging services.* Recent strategies to attract people to the field of gerontological social work include initiatives in the areas of recruitment, curriculum enhancement, and faculty development.

One example of an innovative program designed to increase the numbers of social workers trained to work effectively with the complex situations often encountered in aging services is the Consortium for Social Work Training in Aging. CSWTA is a collaborative effort of three schools of social work and six county departments of adult and aging services in the San Francisco Bay Area. The University of California at Berkeley coordinates the consortium, with initial support from the John A. Hartford Foundation of New York's Gerontological Social Work Practicum Initiative.

The program provides stipends to MSW students who participate in a structured training program involving field experience in a number of county aging-services departments and attendance at seminars and conferences addressing aging-related topics. The program's first-year evaluation provided early evidence of its effectiveness in training and retaining social-work students for work in the field of aging.

Collaborative gerontological social-work training programs such as CSWTA should be established on a long-term basis and implemented throughout California. The state has established similar programs to prepare social-work students for employment in public child-welfare services. With funding from Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, selected MSW students specializing in children's services receive financial stipends, specialized curriculum, and field-work within public child-welfare agencies, while making a commitment to work in this field for two years postgraduation. Many survey respondents suggested the need for a similar program to enhance the numbers and competence of students interested in gerontological social work.

Also needed are broad initiatives to attract and train more social workers and paraprofessionals with gerontological expertise. SB 953, for example, recognizes "the severe shortage of professionals and paraprofessionals necessary to . . . provide services for older adults," and calls on the California State University, University of California, and Community College systems to develop guidelines for content on aging issues in professional degree programs at both the bachelor and graduate level. AB 2202 (Alquist, 2002) requires each CSU campus to provide academic courses and training in gerontology for social workers and other professionals serving the senior population, and to establish a plan for recruiting students into those fields.

Future legislation should continue to address gerontological training in the context of California's growing and increasingly diverse population of older adults. There is a particular need for targeted financial support and other incentives for students to enroll in programs serving the elderly. AB 101 (Alquist, 2001, vetoed in 2002) would have provided scholarships for students in gerontology degree programs, including MSW students specializing in gerontology, while requiring scholarship recipients to practice geriatrics or gerontology for three years after completing the program.

*Offer more-competitive salaries.* Research suggests that gerontology is the lowest-paying field in social work. To make the profession more attractive, more-competitive salaries are needed in Area Agencies on Aging and county departments of adult and aging services, as well as in private and nonprofit agencies serving older people. As long as salaries remain low compared to other areas of practice, it will be difficult to attract an adequate number of trained gerontological social workers.

Inadequate compensation in social work also increases the relative attractiveness of other occupations that utilize aspects of the social-work skill set, such as counseling, teaching, management, administration, and human resources, which may offer wages nearly 20% greater than those in social work.

*Create incentives for professional development.* Significant gaps exist in aging-services training. Of particular concern are APS workers, who typically handle the most complex and difficult cases, including older people whose physical, financial, or emotional well-being is threatened.

Recently the California Department of Social Services developed an APS Worker Training Program to inform APS workers about changes in welfare and institution codes. This program, administered by the CSU Los Angeles School of Social Work, is an important first step.

Legislators should consider expanding the professional development training envisioned by California Senate Bill 2199 (1998), which was enacted to address the issue of elder abuse through improved services and responsiveness of adult-protective services, to include the training of social-work students who would become APS workers after completing their professional degree programs. When budgetary constraints permit, at least 50% of APS staff should be re-

quired to have masters-level training, as is the case in child-protective services.

## Conclusion

Our findings indicate the need for new programs and policies to meet current and future personnel needs in aging services. A more skilled and better-qualified aging-services workforce requires greater incentives for attracting and training students, especially among those who reflect the growing diversity of the state's aging population, such as nonwhite and Latino groups, as well as greater recognition of the value of professional education and training in gerontology.

A larger and more competent aging-services workforce will result in improved services to the growing numbers of people who face the complex and demanding physical and mental-health problems of later life.

*Andrew Scharlach is a professor of social welfare and director of the Center for the Advanced Study of Aging Services at the UC Berkeley School of Social Welfare, where Teresa S. Dal Santo is a senior associate research specialist. Jaimie L. Simon, a graduate student researcher during the course of the study, is now a case manager at the Over 60 Health Center in Berkeley. The survey was funded by CPRC's Policy Research Program and the Center for the Advanced Study of Aging Services.*

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